

## Work Header

Rating:

- [Teen And Up Audiences](#)

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- [No Archive Warnings Apply](#)

Category:

- [M/M](#)

Fandom:

- [IT \(Movies - Muschietti\)](#)

Relationship:

- [Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier](#)

Characters:

- [Eddie Kaspbrak](#)
- [Richie Tozier](#)
- [Patricia Blum Uris](#)
- [Myra Kaspbrak](#)

Additional Tags:

- [Alternate Universe - 1980s](#)
- [Polish Eddie Kaspbrak](#)
- [Winter](#)
- [More Soviet Lore and Visuals for your enjoyment](#)
- [Developing Relationship](#)
- [Phone Booths and Flight](#)
- [the tenuous in between that leads to Becoming something](#)
- [Eddie's Fiat 126p](#)
- [Screenwriter Richie Tozier](#)
- [a bow to the idea of cinema itself](#)
- [Mutual Pining](#)
- [Snow](#)
- [deceptively quiet build up but we go out with a bang friends](#)

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[← Previous Work](#) Part 2 of the [motion picture](#) series [Next Work →](#)

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## a short film about love

### [Lvslie](#)

#### Summary:

*“Hey, who is this?” Something in Richie’s voice has changed, dropped into something less harsh or simply more wary, but Eddie is too paralysed by now to do anything but stay still.*

*A tinny female voice, “Your call will be terminated. In three, two, one—”*

*He hangs up before the click, movement jerky and fast. Then he goes home.*

[Or, Eddie's path to winter, and to Richie coming back.]

#### Notes:

i spent the whole summer with bits of cherry vodka in my head, thinking of the things i'd say if i had more space and time to say it. i walked into autumn still like that. at some point i realized, what i wrote was only half the story.

so here it is, the dark side of the moon.

u know the shtick about this damn old country.

dedicated once again to my comrade @slaviceddie, who helped me bring it to life, and all of my friends who made me believe that i can write it.

(See the end of the work for [more notes](#).)

#### Work Text:

*“I stand, annihilating today’s feelings in myself for the sake  
of tomorrow’s, killing the present tense.”*

- Witold Gombrowicz, Diary.

OCTOBER 1988

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A tram passes rows of grey buildings, clattering. The city is obscured with rain, scattered in the wind. Everything a swimming grey.

Inside a red car, a man in a worn sheepskin coat is sleeping. His face is thin and gaunt, haphazardly shaved. The car is little, red, parked under red graffiti on the grey wall spelling out *SOLIDARNOŚĆ*.

A tram clatters by with loud noise.

The man doesn't move or open his eyes.

Inside the car, a song is playing, the lyrics echoing and distorted grotesquely over the street noise. Someone is shouting, people talking, a child crying. Rain, falling louder and louder.

The man opens his eyes.

He keeps staring ahead, expression empty, eyes dim.

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Her shoes creak on the wooden floor. She walks through the room, long woollen coattails swaying with every movement; and draws to a halt by the window. The harsh light carves her face in fine long lines. Her dark eyes are obscured by a reflection of the window in the lenses of her glasses.

"At the very least," says Patty Blum, voice low and a little drowsy, breath coming out as mist over the folds of her red shawl, "you've got a decent view."

He puts down the keys on the counter by the door. *Clink*. It echoes, jarringly, in the hollow space between the walls. He looks ahead, straight into the imprecise milky light seeping lethargically inside through the naked windows.

"It's quite cold here, though," she adds after a moment, hugging her arms to herself with a small smile. She turns her head towards him. "Isn't the heating on yet?"

"No heating yet," Eddie says, in return offering her something like a tense not-quite-smile. The muscles of his face feel stiffened. *Quite cold*.

"Well," Patty says, folding her arms now and leaning against the exposed white bone of the cold radiator. "You're welcome to keep sleeping on my couch till they get it sorted out."

Eddie snorts, looking up to the ceiling. No cracks, no leaks, at least.

"I don't think my spine will welcome it for much longer," he mutters. Then he adds, "Too old for this."

"Go on," says Patty, after a beat, teasing lightly. "Keep biting the hand that feeds you."

Eddie gives her another look. She smiles.

Pushing herself off the windowsill, she crosses the room in long strides and leans in to kiss him on the cheek—the tip of her nose cold. Eddie smiles, or winces. Or both.

“I’ve got to go,” Patty says, pulling on her gloves. “Duty calls. Try not to freeze.”

“Will do my best,” Eddie says, smiles shortly, looks pointedly away, back to the windows.

She leaves, kitten heels creaking on the wooden floor.

Outside, a bell tolls.

---

*Tick, tock.*

He lowers the last of the electronics boxes to the ground.

The bells are tolling again, so loud as if to paralyse or deafen. It’s a Saturday; must be a funeral, perhaps a wedding. He closes the balcony door. But the sound carries, vibrating, into the small room . The last streak of sunlight dims.

Something inside him coils tight into anger. He walks up to the lonely empty shelf and turns up the radio; it cracks, tinny, before picking up a song.

Yanking a swiss army knife out of his trouser pocket, Eddie makes his way back to the pile of unopened boxes, tearing into the cardboard. As he works, methodic, thoughtless, he starts humming, then picks up the words,

*And the walls shall fall down, fall down, fall down, and bury the old world.*

*Try and fucking shut me up,* he thinks, vicious.

But the bells quieten, and the silence left in their wake is as unwelcoming as the noise had been.

He finishes cutting the boxes open.

---

*Tick, tock.*

He’s rented the apartment through connections. Henryk, Maria’s cousin, who’d taken his side for some bizarre reason Eddie hadn’t wanted to dissect, hooked him up with some guy who “tinkers with residential registration,” and Patty’s lawyer friend-of-a-friend, whom Eddie’s always privately considered insane, cut him a decent deal out of pushing the old flat to someone very clearly needing it for dire, unspecified purposes. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t *want* to know.

Maria had gone back to live with her parents, in the pre-war withering little manor outside Warsaw. She took with her all the old furs and discoloured pearls; left behind a dim scent and a lingering headache of memories.

It's a terse thing, this place. To the point, stripped bare of any whimsy.

Outside, grey; shaped in apartment blocks. Inside white walls, stark furniture. Compared to the clutter of his and Maria's apartment, it feels almost hollow. In many ways, it's a relief.

Most of Eddie's things are mechanisms and devices; a small television, shifty thing he keeps trying to repair but suspects is intrinsically faulty. A radio, almost always on, humming something he doesn't pay attention to to fill the ringing silence. Mismatched bits of deconstructed sound equipment he stashes in the small study and pries open and close with restless hands by the light of a table lamp at night. A shiny plastic-bound box of a phone he got from *Pewex*, which is silent. He hasn't connected it yet, just left, wrapped in coils of thin wire, on a shelf. Clocks.

*Tick, tock.*

He finds he doesn't speak much, now he doesn't live with her. Perhaps it's just the question of not having anyone to *address*, perhaps what they did together could barely be called conversation anyway, but rather exchanging tired words *in perpetuum* without listening. He still isn't sure if he likes silence—or if it's simply preferable to the available alternative.

Someone shouts behind a wall: neighbours. The walls here are thinner than he's used to.

Sometimes, more often than he cares to admit, Eddie addresses Richie in his thoughts.

He sees him, too. In nonsense places: the backdrop of a poster warning against *AMERICAN IMPERIALISM threatening the integrity of the system*. A silhouette through curtains of rain, blurry. The gesture of a man's hand lighting cigarettes, caught at a crowded shoot or a bar. Frayed edges of memory-dreams he comes around from, before morning, vivid before he swiftly loops his focus back around *something else*, something direr and present—till he forgets again.

It's a regular thing, the dreams. A low thrumming pulse of something relentless; uncut wire of connection. Something left mid-sentence and *unfinished*, maybe—but that's even more difficult to voice.

Especially to someone who is so categorically undisposed to answer.

*There's no way out of this that wouldn't fucking hurt.*

Well, it hurts, now. Dimly, like pushing at a bruise, or worse still, pressing it permanently till it aches the entire time, dull and intermittent. Phantom pain, an absence. Pushing at all other presences, leaving no other space.

Mostly, then, he tries not to think.

---

His arms ache from the strain of carrying the boxes. He sits in his concrete matchbox, now, fully clothed, staring at the screen with his arms crossed over his chest.

ZCDP is on, quality fuzzy, screen pixelated, tinted in a rheumy blue. A tinny sarcastic voice announces the tagline in harsh consonants, "*The program will continue in a moment.*"

Something glitches—static. Greyviolet and fuzzy like phosphenes.

Here it is, the interval with nothing on. Just waiting, staticky, for the next thing.

He stares ahead, vision blurring. He doesn't see the screen. Doesn't see much of anything. *The program will continue in a moment.*

*And his was always going to end like this*, Eddie knows. So he doesn't think. *What next?*

Something on the satellite must've died again, because the screen remains static. He doesn't think.

*Tick, tock.*

---

At midnight, the itch grows unbearable.

Shoving his battered taped walkman into the pocket of his jacket, he gets out of the apartment. Footsteps echo dully in the grim hallway, and the wind lashes at his face as soon as he walks out into the dim haze of lampposts.

Pausing just outside, he briefly shuts his eyes, inhaling the familiar scent of damp leaves on the brink of decay. Then he starts walking.

The yard is sunk in wan yellow lamplight, chipped disintegrating blocks with flaking rain-washed paint emerging dimly from the dark, someone's barking dog cutting through the wind, in the distance. He passes a provisional playground: *trzepak*, sandbox and two broken swings. It's searingly cold, the first mid-Autumn frost, as he walks on the cracked concrete, stepping without care over starbursts of crushed glass glinting on the ground like a facsimile of snow.

First of November, *All Hallows*, and if he cared to wander on, he could go further, into the cemetery, eerily alight with uneven rows of unearthly candlelight, left by herdings of people, to commemorate the dead. But something holds him back, keeping tethered to the austere silence between the blocks. Over the wispy flame and over the grave, Eddie knows, one is supposed to talk to those gone and distant.

Well, isn't he doing just that.

*In two weeks*, he thinks, to Richie Tozier and to anyone else who cares to listen, should they exist at all, *I'll be thirty-seven years old.*

*Too old.*

He wants a cigarette but his hands are cold, so he keeps them in the pockets of the faded American windbreaker from Frank, and pretends the mist of his breath is smoke. Like he used to, as a child. He'd spent countless hours as a child just like this, not doing much of anything except *straying*, walking back from school with Patty or completely alone, elliptic and aimless through the neighbourhood, stalling the actual moment of reaching home.

No one here, now, just the nocturnal eyes of windows blinking awake one by one; a few skittish sparrows and crows, dashing out of scant light, and carpets of dying leaves.

*November. Everything trying to die before winter gets to it. And me as well, all over again,* Eddie thinks.

*Such is life.*

He stops, letting the wind push at his chest as if to hold him at distance; card through his hair, more unruly now than Maria ever let it get in winter. It's cold enough he feels feverish, perhaps mildly drunk. He hasn't eaten in hours. His eyes sting from the wind.

Feeling suddenly impossibly tired, *weathered* and old, he sits down on a bench.

He's got the taped old walkman sent by Frank, but he doesn't want any music. His hands shake so much when he lights his last cigarette he misses and burns himself, an angry red mark on the side of his thumb.

He whispers, "*Fuck.*"

Then looks up.

His eyes land on a telephone booth. A little dreary voice retained by chance from some television programme speaks out in his mind, *in 1984 in Poland there were 22728 public telephone booths. Every year 400 go missing; the rest needed often extensive repairs because of vandalism—*

It's not a revelation or even much of a feeling. More like a death of resistance, at last, surrendering to the sharp pull that he's kept dulled for months, not for the lack of wanting. For the lack of *belief*, maybe. Certainty, in himself.

He snuffs out the cigarette, mind blank and open.

Then gets up from the bench, a raw thing waking up inside him second by precarious second, step by step. By the time he's reached the booth, his heart-rate has picked up, fast enough to be painful.

With his untrustworthy hands, he fishes for spare change—some of it falls between the fingers as he presses it into the slot in the scraped old machine. Then he lifts the receiver, and dials the number.

"Chicago," he tells the operator.

There's an empty moment there—minutes or hours, of nothing but the tinny signal, a faint electric cry gliding on waves. Waiting itself made into a sound.

*Clatter, noise.*

*“I fucking told you,”* words, abrupt and loud, bursting through the connection with unexpected strength, *“didn’t I fucking tell you, stop calling me unless you’ve got something new to say other than the same bullshit over and over again—this is a final fucking decision, okay? I made it. I’m done. I don’t give a shit what they want from me, I’m done here, okay? This has been a fuckin’ shitshow from the beginning and I’m sick of it. I don’t know, call fucking Stan if you want my contract details, I’m done.”*

Maybe he does have a fever.

That’s how it feels, doesn’t it, burning hot and searingly cold at the same time. But this is a *violent* feeling, a little sickening, a little like being punched or pushed somewhere. He clings to the phone out of sheer force of will, so that he doesn’t drop it, not trusting the feeling of his own nerve endings.

Richie’s voice sounds off; curt, distant, harsh. Almost unfamiliar. But it’s his, unmistakably, it’s his voice, and that’s more than—

*“... Steve? Are you there?”*

A pause. A heartbeat.

“Hi,” Eddie says very quietly, so that Richie might not even hear him.

Beat.

Then, *“Who the fuck is this?”*

Beat.

Something like cold panic closes up Eddie’s throat.

He presses his eyes shut, forehead pushed up to the freezing glass, and reaches up clumsily to hush the speaker with his hand, so he doesn’t breathe into it, wheezy and awful and so *fucking* revealing.

*It’s been months,* Eddie thinks, *it’s been two fucking months.*

Sometimes, he’d picture a life—something tangible like this, phone-calls and work annoyances, and stripped bedsheets on laundry day, and particular ways of having breakfast, the buzzy laughter of people round a table, having drunk a little *too much*, comfortable enough with each other not to mind. Hazy like a movie, the image feels warm, the way putting hands over a fire is warm. And it feels painful, just as the presence of fire does, when your hands are cold enough.

The glass stings under his forehead as waits through the quiet on the line. *Some other world*, miles ahead, in sharp technicolor. And, *inevitable, really*, Eddie thinks. *To leave anything less vivid behind.*

*“Hey, who is this?”*

Something in Richie’s voice has changed, dropped into something less harsh or simply more wary, but Eddie is too paralysed by now to do anything but stay still.

A tinny female voice, *“Your call will be terminated. In three, two, one—”*

He hangs up before the click, movement jerky and fast.



And stays like that for a moment. Unmoving, except the faint tremors from the cold, forehead pressed still into the spider-cracked glass as if to break it with nothing but the impact of his weight.

Then he goes home, bottle-glass snow creaking under his shoes.

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It's raining outside, Warsaw dim and trembling and grey.

Patty slides the cardboard box across the wooden floor and under the wall with the pointy tip of her shoe. Next to her, stand stacks of albums and records, and books.

"Well, this is lovely," she says. "But how on earth will you fit all these things in here?"

Eddie doesn't look up, taping another box with patchy, frustratingly cheap tape. The glue doesn't hold, not *really*, so he wraps it around, once, twice.

He says, "I'll drop them off at the garage."

He can sense Patty's head turn towards him like a little radar, dark eyes calculative. "You mean at the summer house?"

Eddie cuts the tape off with his pocket knife.

Then, because she never lets things go, Patty asks, "That a touchy subject?"

Yes, Eddie thinks, *so don't touch it*.

There's another pause before she speaks again, "You know, I can't help you unless you want me to help."

Eddie straightens and looks at her, schooling his face into his best unreadable expression.

"Yeah," he says, nodding. "You're right. You can't help me."

For a moment they keep looking at each other: two people, knowing one another all too well for these sorts of evasions. Then Patty sighs.

"Have it your way," she says, turning away. "I have to go anyway. Duty calls. I'll see you tomorrow at the shoot."

Eddie nods curtly, sick to his stomach with a mild unsettled guilt. Not enough to utter a word, definitely not enough to apologize. He stays still, staring out into the vague grey outside, trying not to think. Listens her footsteps, as she gathers her clothes and purse; then the click and rattle of the heavy front door as she pulls it open.

"By the way," comes Patty's voice, dimmer now and echoing lightly in the hallway. "You've got a notice for a parcel. Frank?"

Eddie shuts his eyes. A stab of pain sears through his head.

“Yeah,” he says wearily. “Birthday gift.”

There’s a lingering moment of silence, and, if he cared enough, he could picture the exact look of skepticism on her face. She’d never held Eddie’s parents in much regard, and commented on his rare attempts to call his relatives *family* mostly with telling silence.

Now she asks, “He sends you birthday gifts?”

“It’s painkillers,” Eddie says curtly, suddenly desperately wanting her *gone*, and feeling the guilt about it creep up on him like a strangling vine. “Prescription.”

“I see,” Patty says, her tone unbearably neutral. “Well, that’s more like what I thought. Have a good day, Eddie.”

Eddie waits for the door to clatter shut before he moves.

---

The engine revs, a wheezy ragged sound of years-old overuse. The last of the boxes he hadn’t managed to shove in the backseat and trunk rattles in the passenger seat next to him,

“Alright, old man,” Eddie mutters soothingly, patting the dashboard as if he’s talking to an old friend, “we’re almost there.”

He swerves from the road into the field.

The car dips into the overgrown path, sinking roughly under the steep incline, and wades into the dried, white-greyed grass and wheat. Then it slows, quieting, crawling up to the half-obsured gate.

Eddie gets out of the car, scaring off a skittish hare.

Fog rises and crawls over the field, swallowing the horizon into a distant blur.

Everything sunk, half-invisible: the trees around the obsured house, touched with autumn like a progressing disease. The chestnut tree bends heavy over the gate, browned and weary, with green spiky fruit strewn on the ground.

It’s quiet. The fields are empty. A V of wintering cranes flies overhead with a multiplied cry.

He hesitates for a moment, as if unable to take the step. Then snaps out.

*Ridiculous*, Eddie thinks, *it’s not like you’ve been hiding here all this time.*

He unlatches the gate and pushes it open. He leaves the car stranded behind.

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The garage door whines, hinges rusty and damp, as he levers it open in one motion. He drags the boxes one by one, stashing them along the walls. A spider scurries on the floor and hides in the mottled cobwebs in the corner. He spares the fully-stocked preserve cupboard only a glance, before turning sharply away and moving to close the garage door.

There's a sudden noise, something rustling and swift, twitchy.

Eddie turns.

The marten, thinner and fuzzier now in anticipation of winter, staring out of the marshy pile of leaves under the hazelnut with two little eyes, frozen in place at the sight of him.

Eddie stares back.

Then, very slowly, he crouches on the dead leaves.

"Hi," he says, very quietly, and holds out his hand. The animal doesn't move, staring.

Eddie tsks. "C'mon," he mutters. "Don't be afraid."

On impulse, he leans a little closer, sinking to his knees.

The kuna startles and dashes away.

The wind picks up. He's kneeling in the leaves and dying grass, open hand outstretched as if begging for something. Slowly he lowers it, dragging his fingers through the earthy ground. *Close to the dirt*, he thinks.

He sits back on his heels. Ducks his face and *laughs*. He runs his clean hand down his unshaved face.

"God—" he says, and trails off.

He feels suddenly *absurdly* alone.

So much that he could lie back, on the cold dead, and inhale the earth, until he sinks down and grows *roots*, or until he fades entirely, becoming something even less human and living, but perhaps more intact.

*Breathe in.*

"I never used to feel so alone," Eddie mutters to Richie and the leaves. "So why now."

Like withdrawals, like some sort of addiction—to what? *Communication*, Eddie thinks. *Response*. He opens his right hand again, palm streaked with dirt like a cut or a stain; and runs the fingers of the left one against it.

*You know*, he thinks, *I still remember being touched.*

*How long?*

He gets up then, tired with himself, and walks towards the house, sitting haunted and shrouded in mist at the top of the stairs.

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It's cold inside, too. Unwelcoming. Dew has dimmed the shuttered windows in the veranda, cold crawling itself inside through the cracks and fissures. The light from the door is bland, greyish, distorting everything into something like decay or old age. Abandoned.

By the window, by the little table, Richie's yellow shirt lies folded on the back of the chair.

"There you are," Eddie says, and approaches.

Cold in touch, damp a little. Evidence of existence, or a strange artefact out of a dream, proving something.

Eddie picks it up, then crumples in his hand and lets it drop. Strange feeling; an ache, or something of the kind. Harder to ignore now. It's quiet enough in the house he can hear the woodpecker outside, the faint howling of wind in the gutters.

He sits on the edge of the bed.

Then leans back.

*If I want it bad enough*, he thinks, shutting his eyes. *If I want to go back—*

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It rains on the way between garage and house—short trajectory, straightest line from point to point, and they keep locked together throughout the dewy grass, hand to elbow, threaded fingers, fabric, up the stairs and to the door, clumsily.

Richie presses him to the door, body to body, and Eddie has to draw them both away, together. Pulls, to fumble for the lock and pry it open. Then they fall in, disoriented and dizzy, unable to stop the momentum.

He breaks off and keeps walking, backing away, till he hits the wall opposite to the door: wood between the shoulder blades, startling the breath out of him. Richie stands there, on the threshold, uncertain and dishevelled, outlined by the rain. Looking at him, asking something.

*Keep looking.*

He looks back, with every unrealised want and intention, trying to contain it in the moment and direct it at Richie. His clothes and hair are wet from the rain.

"Come here," he says, and Richie *did*.

---

He opens his eyes.

Well, nothing happens regardless. Lies unmoving for a moment, then gathers himself from the bed and walks out. He holds on to the shirt, then tosses it into the last of the boxes in the car.

A single bird cries out, poignant and ragged somehow. Something is watching from the hazelnut as he drives away.

---

It's dark already when he parks in front of the post office. He snatches the notice from under the box in the passenger's seat, stuffs it between his teeth as he kills the engine, and wrenches the door open.

It's windy outside; piercingly so. Eddie fixes the windbreaker tight around himself, slipping the notice underneath as he jogs up to the door.

The office is mostly empty at this hour, dingy, with dim yellowish light that crawls over dun, trodden linoleum and scabby walls. Sniffing, he makes his way to the counter, where a peeved woman in a uniform is filling in the crossword in a day-old copy of *People's Tribune*.

"Edward Kasprzak," Eddie says, sliding the notice under the hatch in the glass along with his ID. "Here to pick up a package from Franciszek Kasprzak."

Very slowly, the woman turns a page of the newspaper, looks up at Eddie with something approaching disgust, looks down at the notice, picks it up. Finally, she gets up with a long-suffering sigh and goes to the wall unit with pigeonholes behind her.

Eddie sighs too, quieter. Pinches the bridge of his nose with his elbow propped on the counter, frowns. He can feel the early pulses of an oncoming headache. Tension.

"We have that too," comes the woman's muffled voice, shaking him awake, "but this is for something else."

Eddie looks up with a frown, distracted. "Sorry, what?"

"The notice is for something else," the woman repeats, dispassionate, tossing it back at him. "A different package. Old."

"Old?" Eddie repeats. "What is it?"

"What am I, the Lord Omniscient?" the woman asks, smacking the newspaper back to the crossword section. "I don't know. Pick it up and see."

She shoves both parcels towards him under the hatch.

Eddie looks down. There's no return address.

"This is from September," he says incredulously. "That's months ago."

The woman is not looking at him, settling in her chair instead. “Should’ve picked it up earlier then.”

Eddie’s jaw twitches. “How would I know—”

“You’re holding up the queue.” There’s no one in the office besides Eddie.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” he says. The woman glares at him.

“Goodbye,” she tells him, snapping the hatch shut.

Eddie straightens up, inhaling slowly as not to shout.

When he steps outside, it’s rapidly darker, lamplights flickering to light one by one in an unsettling dance, wrapped in the overbearing wind which picks at his clothes, stifling breath.

He stuffs Frank’s parcel under his arms and plucks at the seal of the other package—narrow, flat—trying to pry it open.

His fingers are red and numb from cold by the time he manages to tear it open.

The brown paper flaps in the wind, revealing something white. *Letters*, printed in black ink, somewhat smudged, as if hidden in a haste. Someone’s scrawling handwriting upon it.

Frowning, Eddie tears the brown paper fully open. The wind almost wrenches the stack of pages from his unsuspecting hands so he grasps them to his chest. Taken by surprise, he doesn’t understand first, heart-rate elevated in a sharp spike of adrenalin, understanding what his eyes see before the mind does. Something is suddenly terrifying and he doesn’t—

It’s a title page.

And it hits him, finally. It’s a screenplay.

“Jesus,” Eddie says aloud, voice hoarse in the sharp wind. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

His heart is beating so fast it’s painful. He feels hot, irrationally, burning up and sweaty in the cold wind as if something inside him is going to give in and burst. His eyes skim the page frantically: the oddly familiar title, the smudge of fresh ink over the—

Dedication. *To Eddie*, in slanted handwriting. No letter, no note, just the two awful words. *To Eddie*.

“September,” Eddie says, beginning to shake. His voice is thin and taut in the wind. “It’s from—fucking *September*, I didn’t know, I didn’t—”

“The fuck are you talking to?”

He swivels around, disoriented. Someone brushes past him, roughly, a young man with a hood on. In a trashcan nearby, fire is burning. An old woman in a headcloth is disappearing down the street.

He keeps looking, side to side, as if desperate for someone’s confirmation, but there’s no one willing to witness him. His breathing goes ragged. *I can’t breathe*, he thinks. *I need an—I need my inhaler*.

Richie’s voice, replayed in his head like a mocking record. *You breathe alright now*.

Or maybe it’s a heart attack. It feels like his heart will—*fucking*—tear itself out of the ribcage.

Surprised by his own direction, he stumbles into the Fiat and leans heavily against it. He shakes his head, as if in denial, shaking all over now.

“Fuck,” he whispers.

No one answers him. The last of the lamplights flickers to life over his head.

---

He steps into the dark apartment and flicks on the light.

It feels too sharp, too intrusive, and he flinches, shoulders hunched. Tries to get a hold of the unbound screenplay but the pages keep falling out of his useless hands until he gives in and in a burst of dejection, throws them to the floor.

He flicks the light back off. Dark. *Small relief.*

In the dreary silence of the empty hollow apartment, he can hear nothing but the clock ticking, like the clatter of a typewriter.

*Tick, tock.*

In a burst of scorching, helpless anger, Eddie punches the wall.

“Fuck,” Eddie whispers. Then he shouts, “FUCK!”

He’s shaking, whole body. He leans against the wall, arms boxed against it, and bows his head between them, breathing hard and ragged, trying to contain the unbearable feeling inside.

*Have I ruined it, he thinks, manic. Have I fucking ruined—*

He straightens, eyes hazy and chest heaving, and runs a hand through his hair; then down his face. Almost blindly, he turns, then crouches, sinks to his knees.

Starts picking up the pages one by one.

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The clock ticks 4:56 AM.

Dawning-blue light seeps through the window by his bed. He watches the ceiling.

He hasn’t slept. He’s exhausted, cold with it, achy-headed with burning eyes. Twitching at intervals of time, he feels strung taut, raw like an exposed wire. There’s a sheaf of pages on his bare chest, one hand folded over it as if to defend himself.

“Hey,” he says, hoarsely, to the dim ceiling. “I read your screenplay.”

His eyes are wet; he lifts his free hand to cover them. The other tightens on his chest.

5:00 AM.

Eddie inhales sharply and swings his legs off the bed. screenplay pages fall scattered around him as he walks to the phone and tears it out of the shelf. Then he throws himself back onto the bed and the pages, the cord straining, stretched taut, across the room.

Fitting the receiver awkwardly under his chin, Eddie dials the number.

*Answer. Don't answer, he thinks. Please.*

It's late—it must be quite *late* where he is, seven hours difference from Warsaw to Chicago, he might be out, or *asleep*, or with someone, and this could be a terrible fucking idea because it's been months, *months* since—

*"Hello?"*

He sounds tired, somewhat hazy. Maybe a little resigned. More familiar now that Eddie's yielded finally to the memory, and let himself remember all the small details and movements.

He shuts his eyes.

*Breathe in.*

*"Hej,"* Eddie says, a bit too much pressure on the last vowel again, a pointed accent that shouldn't be there, revealing.

There's a beat.

*"Who is this?"* says Richie, sounding ... hesitant? Uncertain. Tired still.

And Eddie keeps breathing, consciously, and keeps his eyes shut tight. He fights the urge to turn over on the bed and bury his face in the pillow, bury himself in sleep, to be forever unconscious.

*It's me,* he thinks, feeling ridiculous, feeling pried open and exposed to something like radiation, killing cell and tissue inch by inch. *Do you even remember me.*

*"It's me,"* he says into the receiver. *"It's, uh. It's Eddie."*

Another pause—stretched into infinity.

Then, noise.

A crash of something, loud and rattling through the phone connection, startling Eddie's eyes open and making him flinch. Greyblue morning light crawls over the ceiling in streaks.

Then, at last,

*"Oh, shit!"* Richie says. *"Fuck."*

Something strange, like a smile, comes unbidden and treacherous, wanting to tug at the corner of Eddie's mouth. His hand is shaking a little where he is pressing the receiver so hard into the side of his face it digs painfully into the flesh.



But something has shifted. His vocal cords start working again. He feels *awake*.

“Did you die?” he hears his own voice, eerily steady. “Did I just kill you?”

“No, I’m—” Richie’s voice, distant then suddenly very close, still startled. “*Oh, fuck you. I’m fucking fine, I just—*”

Pause.

“—walked into a cupboard.”

“You what.”

And suddenly he can’t contain it, he laughs.

It’s quite involuntary, a little manic perhaps. Well, *who cares*, it all can’t possibly become any more mortifying than it *already is*, and it also feels—good. Like exhaling.

There’s a pause on the line as he winds down.

And then,

“*Fuck*,” Richie says again, but his voice is different now—softer, awfully so. “*It really is you.*”

Eddie falls sharply silent.

It’s a way of speaking he’s only ever heard directed at him once. And it’s a strange thought, regardless. To be recognised by something as private as a laugh. He doesn’t laugh often. He’s not someone who laughs.

“Yeah,” Eddie says, clutching the receiver as he shuts his eyes again. “Long time no see.”

“*Yeah*,” Richie echoes.

There’s another pause, now, different. Something almost shy about it, unsettlingly so. His heart is loud and urgent in his throat.

Drawing a breath, Eddie says, “I got your script.”

“*You got my ...*” Richie begins, as though automatically, and then trails off. Like the words sink in. “*What, like ... like, now you got it?*”

He’s going to fucking cry.

He’s going to—*no. No*. Eddie shakes his head, jaw tight.

“Yeah,” he says, “it got—stuck at the post office.”

There’s another moment of pause, as he blinks at his brightening ceiling.

Then Richie says, “*Oh.*”

---

It's early morning. Sunlight insinuates itself idly through the window, pulled ajar, the bright hue of it belying the crisp air. It's cold, properly so. It doesn't matter much.

On the line, Richies voice grows thready and inconsequential, muttered:

*"So he goes ... he goes, you understand, round to her apartment, right? And there's like. Blood all over everything and shit. You know. So he thinks she's—he's got to her? That other guy... like the you know, the horse head... warning... thing. From. Yeah. So then, there's this like, tie back to the beginning with the ... with the wolf and he like, rams it open, I mean the door, with—"*

Eddie stifles a yawn. "There was a wolf in the beginning?"

*"Yeah, dude, are you even listening to me?"*

"I am," Eddie says, blinking to disperse the drowsiness. "I'm not sure you are. Listening to yourself."

*"Huh,"* says Richie. There's a noise—there's *always* strange noises surrounding him, a small cacophony of clicks, clatters and rustling.

There's an open jar placed precariously on the narrow metal windowsill ledge on the balcony. Lethargically, Eddie stirs linden honey into the wobbly glass of black tea he's holding on a saucer in his lap. The receiver's tucked under his chin, plastic warmed by prolonged contact.

"What's this one about?" he mutters. "Like. At the core."

*"Uh,"* Richie says, then laughs, as if embarrassed. He gets dodgy about it, evasive when asked directly, Eddie knows by now. *"You tell me."*

"Me?" he mutters, tucking the receiver more firmly under his chin and fixing the thready old blanket tighter around himself. It's his time to laugh. "What am I, a ... a what. A film critic? I don't know shit."

*"I think you interpret things alright,"* Richie says vaguely.

Eddie coughs, because his tea is hot.

*"Consumption?"* Richie says neutrally, as if unaware of what he'd said.

"Fuck off," Eddie says. His cheeks hurt from cold, or perhaps, smiling.

Then, "Have you slept at all?"

A telling silence follows, punctuated something like a sniff.

*"No,"* Richie says, haughtily. Then, as if in retaliation, *"Have you?"*

"Yes," Eddie says, unable to stifle another yawn. "You woke me up."

Richie's understanding of timezones is patchy at best. He calls more often because, as he succinctly puts it, *he can afford it*; and he calls at a schedule as arbitrary as a short-term weather forecast—always just a little off to the expectation. It could be annoying, Eddie thinks; it sometimes *is* quite troubling.

He likes it. A lot.

6 AM now, *again*, on a Saturday, dawn brightening over the city through thin patchy clouds. And it's not like Eddie has something better to do.

Small wandering routine:

Pick up the phone blindly, pulled straight out of deep sleep, trying not to drop it. Stumble out of bed and make coffee in the kitchen: bleary, sleep-warm, listening to Richie's circular stream of thoughts, warm and staticky through the thready connection like a well-known radio station.

Richie doesn't let it go. "*What time is it there, even?*"

"Getting six," Eddie mutters, then shivers in the cold.

"*Oh, shit,*" Richie says, then laughs, clearly abashed. "*When'd I even wake you up? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—*"

Eddie closes his eyes and smiles again; to himself. He takes care for his voice to be neutral before he speaks, minding the blurry edges of crossing boundaries as best he can without asking outright.

"Early," he says, warmly, "But I didn't mind."

Silence on the line. Well, not *quite*—he thinks he can hear Richie breathe too, at times, slow and rhythmic. In fact, sometimes he likes these moments best. Not to say he doesn't like his voice, Eddie is quite certain there's few things he likes more in the world. But this, here, a small shared silence, feels almost as if he were—

*Closer.*

Richie speaks, then, voice oddly taut and uncertain.

He says, "*What's your wife have to say about this, huh?*"

And *that's* sobering enough.

Blinking rapidly, Eddie sits up, harshly alert.

"I don't know?" he says.

Then, after a pause. "I don't give a shit."

Richie laughs again, an echo of something gone by: a little incredulous, a little startled. "*Amazing.*"

Eddie tenses, the realisation of something unspoken carrying a different meaning he'd thought it did. He frowns, trying to assess the risk as best he can, test the limits of honesty he can push at. It feels like crossing a bridge. His heart rate picks up.

Carefully, slowly, he says, "I don't ... live with her anymore."

A beat.

"*No?*"

"No."

Another; but longer this time. Unnervingly hollow.

“*Did she, uh—*” Richie starts, then trails off. He doesn’t sound surprised or relieved, he sounds terribly tense. “*Did she find out about ...?*”

And Eddie thinks, *here it is.*  
“Well, yes,” he begins, breathing in. “I told her.”

“*You—*”

“When I left,” he finishes, feeling his heart resonate in his ribcage like something about to detonate, “I told her why I’m leaving.”

“Seemed fair,” he adds, quieter.

He can’t feel or taste the sweet tea when he swallows it down in one go; the impact of a spark when the house is on fire.

“*When you—*” Richie’s voice, very quiet, “*When you left.*”

“Yeah.” Eddie closes his eyes.

“*Fuck,*” Richie says again.

Then, before Eddie thinks to say something else stupid, “*Jesus. You left her. That’s—*”

“Reckless?” Eddie cuts in. He snorts. “Yeah, trust me, I know, I—”

“No,” Richie says, sounding almost angry. “*That’s ... that’s fucking brave.*”

And, *ah*, Eddie thinks, feeling punched in the chest, somewhere that would bruise. *I didn’t think this through.*

He begins, tense and uncertain, “No, I’m not—”

“*Yeah, you fucking are.*”

He sounds angry, still, or just heated. So much more *awake* all at once, to match Eddie, like they’ve both been thrown off rhythm completely by each other. Eddie finds himself suddenly unable to predict the trajectory the rest of the conversation will take.

“*Where do you live now?*” Richie asks, abruptly.

Eddie tries to exhale without shaking, “Uh, I got a place. Small, I mean ...” he cuts himself off. “But it’s *mine*, you know? It’s ... something.”

He pauses.

“Yeah, this is, uh ... this me *starting over*, I guess,” he adds. “Like I said, back then. That old life, that ... that didn’t really work out.”

And oh, *god*, he said too much. His jaw tightens.

A breath on the line, then, “*Fuck, Eddie.*”

Eddie laughs, but it’s humourless. His turn to border on mania, graze the edges of it. He thinks, *What the fuck did you expect?*

Aloud he says, “That unexpected, huh?”

“No,” Richie says, and he sounds almost pained now. “No, it’s not. *Fucking hell, Eddie. I don’t know how ... how I didn’t know. I must’ve just—I mean, of course you left. Of course you left. It’s you. Fuck. you’re the bravest person I know. I’m, like. So fucking proud of you.*”

There’s a small silence.

*Fuck you*, Eddie thinks. His chest hurts; like he really does have a weak lung.

“Thank you,” he says, tense. Then, “I have to go. I have work later.”

“*I—yeah, sure. Right. Yeah,*” Richie says, something in his voice Eddie can’t stand to dissect right now. His hands are shaking.

Then Richie asks, “*Talk to you soon?*” the implied question mark threaded with such uncertainty that Eddie wants to shout, or maybe throw the phone out, over the rain-corroded railing to the ground.

“Yeah,” he says instead, containing himself. “Of course.”

And hangs up before he says anything stupider.

He thinks, despite himself, *how dare you make me feel like this again*, he thinks. *Like you see me.*

*Now that I almost forgot.*

---

He calls next, though Richie instantly insists to call him back. He sounds so ridiculously relieved that Eddie’s stomach turns. So he keeps on talking, over the nerves and strange guilt, desperate to fill the silence.

“Yeah I’m gonna—I’m gonna weld it back together once it’s done,” he says, “I’ve got some rosin, and I’m going to solve it with—with alcohol, and then—”

“Ah,” Richie says, “*cherry vodka?*”

“What? No, what the fuck is wrong with you,” Eddie says, wincing. He stirs the soup with a ladle. “I’m not using something I’ve prepared for months to weld a fucking tube amplifier—”

“*A tube amplifier,*” Richie repeats fondly. Then, before Eddie can snap again, “*What are you using, then?*”

“Uh,” Eddie says, trying to pry the herb sachet open with the use of one hand and his teeth, “Denaturat?”

“*The what?*”

“It’s like—” Eddie says, balancing the phone on his thigh as he tries to uncork the bottle. “Strong as fuck. Ninety-two percent ethanol. Poisonous? Well, not really, they had to like, tone it down with the

toxins so people who do drink it—‘cause people drink it, you know—so they wouldn’t die. And you won’t die if you drink it but your insides won’t thank you—”

“*How’s it look?*”

“It’s like, garishly purple,” Eddie tells him.

“Yum,” Richie says. “*Forbidden drink. Should’ve made that for me.*”

Eddie snorts, and catches the phone before it falls to the ground. “Fuck off.”

He can picture Richie’s grin. He shifts the receiver to his other shoulder, “How’s the script going?”

Richie sighs. “*Ah, her. We’re on a break.*”

“Wonderful,” Eddie says, “Have you considered showing *her* to someone—”

“No,” Richie says instantly, the word punctuated with a small hysterical laugh. “*I don’t let anyone read my stuff before it’s finished, are you kidding me?*”

Eddie doesn’t have many context clues to work on, but Richie suddenly strikes him as sharper and more jittery than he tends to be. Over-caffeinated, or—nervous?

He goes on, “*I mean, I guess Bill when I have to, when we co-write, but definitely not before I pull my shit together and—*”

Eddie frowns. He flicks a pinch of marjoram into the broth, followed by a pinch of dill.

“You’re letting *me*?” he points out, muffled slightly by the angle, into the receiver, “Like, right now.”

“*Yeah, but it’s you,*” Richie says, which, frustratingly, could mean anything from *you’re special* to *you don’t actually matter*. “*Anyway, Steve said—*”

He slowly weaves the quilt of acquaintances and recurring characters in his story, which Eddie meticulously catalogues. Most of them he already knows: Bill the other writer, “*an air-quotes Author more than screenwriter,*” as Richie distinguishes, Mike and Ben, and Bev who turns out to be his childhood friend, *Stan the Man*. New names appear occasionally—like Steve the agent, Sandy, Audra, Kay. A myriad people, interlinked.

But nothing in his life seems *binding*.

He seems to live alone. Can’t name his neighbours. Eddie hates himself for finding the notion stabilising, and still clings to the comfort despite it.

Right now, he finishes the loping vague anecdote with a swerve of, “*What’re you cookin’ anyway?*”

Eddie glances down, “Oh, it’s—it’s something for work.”

“*You cook, too? For work?*” Richie says. “*Renaissance man.*”

“Yes, I am,” Eddie says primly. Richie laughs.

The draft of cold eases, momentarily.

---

Eddie lights a cigarette. Leans against the doorframe.

“Hey, the other day,” Richie says suddenly, abruptly conversational, enough for it to be *telling*. “When you said you—left.”

“Mh,” Eddie says, taking a drag. *Here it is*. “Mhm?”

“I, uh. I wasn’t really surprised,” Richie says. Then he catches himself. “No, fuck, I mean. I very fucking obviously was. It’s just, I tried not to think too much about it or assume, and you never said anything so—”

“So you did assume,” Eddie mutters. Then, “It’s okay.”

He’s standing in the balcony door, looking out. The cord of the telephone stretches taut, angling inside the apartment.

“I probably would’ve, too,” he says at length, knowing he wouldn’t.

“No. I—” Richie says, and trails off. Then he blurts out, “Guess I just wasn’t sure know how much—”

Eddie’s jaw tightens. “What.”

“How much that all ... was,” says Richie’s voice, distorted through all the space pulled closer on gliding, cracked wavelengths. “To you.”

There’s a silence.

*Everything*, Eddie thinks, closing his eyes, *are you fucking kidding me?*

Instead, he says, “Funny.”

And swallows, throat suddenly dry in spite of all the honey. “I thought the same, when I got your screenplay.”

Richie quietens.

“Funny,” he echoes at length, the tinny voice gone soft.

Eddie shuts his eyes.

*I miss you so much*, he says in his thoughts. *Every fucking day I wake up. And you’re not here, and I miss you, and I never stopped.*

He inhales sharply. It’s later now: light’s shifted, but the air is still dizzying.

And he let himself imagine what he usually allows only at dark, in the shallow waters of the very brink of sleep when he loses the exact edges of his own consciousness. Richie: *here*, physically, in Eddie’s own present reality. In Eddie’s small apartment, with Eddie in bed or here on the balcony, Richie’s chin on his shoulder, arm wrapped around him from behind. Holding him.

Not holding back. Steadying.

And Eddie would turn his cheek against Richie's scratchy jaw, and pull him down into the chair, and draw the old patchy blanket around them and Richie would, possibly—

He opens his eyes, throat suddenly tight.

He says, "You said I was brave."

"No," Richie says. "*I said you are.*"

"But it's not—" Eddie breaks off. Fixes the blanket around himself like a strange coat or wings again, folded into a shelter for the winter. He's cold to the bone.

"*It's not what?*"

Pause. Then, blurted out.

"It seems to cost me a lot," he says, with some difficulty. "To just be ... human. Like, properly so. I keep—struggling. I try. It's stupid, but sometimes I feel like it's harder now. Like it'd be easier to just."

*Fall asleep in the snow.*

He exhales shakily, "Give up? I don't know. Does this make sense?"

There's a moment of pause.

Then Richie says, "*Yeah, it does.*" He pauses. "*Don't, though. You're ... you're too good for it.*"

Eddie snorts. "Thanks."

It feels like balancing on the line, now—what he wants to say almost feels too vulnerable and too silly, to be handed over like that. But he wants to be honest.

He pulls at the cord of the phone, blinking.

"Maybe it's the landscape," he says quietly.

He looks up, blinking at the skyline rising colourless over the perpendicular range of buildings. Grey is overhead now, stretching over the scratched-up patchy square below. A quiet colour, forcibly so.

Brutalist. Yes, like—

"Like some sort of hidden violence," Eddie says. "Everywhere. It kills you, if you ... if you don't pay attention."

He feels suddenly angry, cold, feels made into something despicable despite his own directions, cheated out of a chance to understand how to do something before having it wrenched out of his reach

"*You should be a filmmaker,*" Richie muses, voice soft. "*Or, I don't know. Something--*"

He hesitates. *More than this*, Eddie knows he'd wanted to say.

"I am, *dick*," he says aloud, taking a drag of his cigarette. "I did sound for your fucking movie."

"*No, you didn't,*" Richie says dismissively. "*You were supposed to do my sound but you—*"

"Yeah, well, it's not my fault your failed fucking movie was never even shot."



“—*spilled your coffee over our very expensive—*”

“Oh, fuck you, dude,” Eddie says, sitting up. “YOU said it wasn’t—”

Richie barks out a tinny, intercontinental laugh.

A shiver creeps down Eddie’s spine with a rush of warmth.

This—this laugh.

*God, I miss you*, he thinks again, the repeated thought so unbelievably stupid and ill-advised it almost makes him laugh as well.

Richie, he thinks, *can you tell? I miss you so fucking much. All the time.*

He quietens, and tries to force it all back under, the sudden edge of desperation, breathe through it. Bury it back, or thin it at least, like alcohol, into something less lethal.

Richie speaks up, quietly. “*You okay there?*”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, voice gone hoarse. “Yeah I’m—I’m good.”

---

December sinks further and deeper in time, quietly bending towards an end.

It’s always *cold* these days, always snowing, the world seen through a curtain of whitish particles. It feels like a cruel directory, something pointed: something in the universe conspiring against him to prove nothing *is* summer anymore, perhaps nothing has ever been.

It feels—as he stands outside the shop, limbs stiff and skin flushed—*surreal*. To remember such disarming warmth, the persistent sunlight infused straight into the blood, skin burning night and day. To remember something so opposite, and so illogical.

*Fever dream*, Eddie thinks.

He’s shivering when he gets out of the car, carrying a crate of oranges.

---

Music seeps, enervating, out of the sound equipment pushed to the walls in the auditorium. Pushed up to the window, feeling hunted, Eddie is eating an orange.

He’s surrounded by strands of conversation, overlapping, plucking at him as if to pull him in by this or that fishhook. He’s good at distancing himself from it; good at becoming invisible under skimming eyes. But there has been a *shift*, strange and quite unwelcome.

Somewhere along with the end of summer, there came sudden attention. The eyes on him, pointedly and with a keen interest he'd never felt before. It feels alien, and *alienating*, a constant dim awareness of being watched, and judged, and whispered about till he turns and—

The woman smiles, a picture of sweetness and polite concern. He struggles and fails to remember her name. She dabs her cake with a fork.

“Daddy still in America?”

“Mhm,” Eddie throws the orange away and then licks the residue of juice from his knuckles. “Afraid so.”

“Your poor mother—”

He doesn't as much as twitch. “My mother is dead.”

“—and I heard you split with Maria,” she goes on, voice suddenly stronger, as though ripe with selfless sympathy, *cloying* with it. “Such an unfortunate—”

“Thank you,” Eddie says, a little louder. “For your kind words.”

He feels nauseous, more than anything. Disgusted, and somehow entangled in the feeling. He has the urge to leave, wrench himself out of sight and never show again.

*Don't look at me.* But they do.

So he stuffs the crescent of orange into his mouth and chews, keeping furious eye contact.

“Is there anything else you wanted to ask?” he asks, bluntly.

For the first time, she falters, before conjuring another smile. “Aren't you allergic to oranges? I think I remember clearly from the Worker Package that your personal note said—”

“*Clearly*,” Eddie says, grimacing in a tight lipped smile and licking his gums, “you don't remember it *that* clearly. Merry Christmas.”

Trying not to dislocate his jaw from gritting his teeth, he pushes himself off the table and stalks away, manoeuvring between the chattering people—towards a different fixed point, a distinctly solitary person standing by the fruit and dessert table.

Tall woman in a red jacket, enshrouded with a trail of cigarette smoke. She stands under an informative *MOONSHINE CAUSES BLINDNESS* poster, fixing the room with a faraway look.

Eddie approaches, pours himself the vodka-spiked dried plum *kompot* and downs his glass in one go. Winces.

“And good day to *you*,” Patty says absently.

“D'you want to get out of here?” Eddie asks, indistinctly, pouring himself more.

Patty studies the ceiling with masterful indifference. She doesn't move. “You know they think we're having an affair.”

It's not quite a question.

Eddie almost chokes on his *kompot*. Something like anger spikes in his chest. “What?” he barks out.

She sighs, then snuffs out her cigarette in an ashtray. “They used to think it was Beverly Marsh, but decided you’d be reaching for the *moon*.”

Eddie stiffens. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Why do you think I’m telling you this,” Patty says wearily, still looking anywhere but at him.

“I haven’t—” he says, and cuts himself off. *Done anything*.

He clenches his jaw.

“So am I supposed to pretend I don’t know you now?” he asks instead, harsher than he means. “Is that what you want?”

Patty inhales, and turns to look at him at last—eyes narrowed, head tilted to one side, speculative like a cat assessing the mouse.

“Do you hear yourself?” she says at last, gently. “Don’t make me into your enemy, Eddie. Because I’m not. For your own sake, I hope you’re aware of this.”

Some of the anger drains from him, or is simply redirected. He nods, shakes his head, then looks away.

There’s a moment of pause.

“I looked through the Uris footage,” she says at length. “We could sign up to do one of the shorts, if the studio is interested.”

“Uris?” Eddie repeats. “What, you mean Rich—I mean, the director?”

“Yes,” Patty says, and stifles a yawn with the back of her hand. She seems very drowsy, “Strange man. We correspond.”

Eddie stares at her. “I see,” he says, fatigue creeping over him suddenly, threatening to pull him down.

He looks at her for a moment: strangely frail in her secluded corner, watching the people with large melancholy eyes.

Something twists inside him. He wants to do something, maybe hug her, maybe leave. But he is suddenly unbelievably tired. Picks another orange from the table, and slowly pries it open.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie says.

“So am I,” Patty tells him, turning her head back to him with a peculiar smile. “Not about this nonsense; I think it’s giving cover to us both.” She pauses, “That’s why I wanted you to know.”

Eddie blinks, then swallows. Looks down at his hands.

He tries to pick his words carefully, urge the thing he wants to say out of his throat, but it feels too *large* to put in words. Choking. So he swallows it down, feeling once again like a coward.

Mutters, “The hell do *you* need a cover for?”

“Eat your orange, Eddie,” Patty tells him.

Eddie smiles, and shakes his head.

When he looks up, she's still looking at him with that strange little smile.

"Yeah," she says. "Let's get out of here. I think I've had enough of Christmas."

---

They sit in the car for a moment. Frost crawls over the front glass, painting a mosaic of irregular patterns.

The radio is crooning something wistful.

"You're going to be okay on your own?" Patty says eventually. She doesn't look at him, intuiting somehow his persistent reluctance to be confronted.

"I can stay with you. Watch something, I don't know. Get drunk, sing carols. Whatever it is you do."

She yawns again, the end of the sentence muffled with her glove.

"I'll be fine," Eddie says. "But thank you."

Then, "Please get some rest."

She nods, then smiles at him. Fixes her coat, and gets out of the car. He watches the swaying edge of her red shawl till she disappears in the building.

Then starts the engine.

---

He parks violently and haphazardly at the curb, and stalks to the building. Not even perceiving the cold creeping up from the darkblue night over the city.

Somehow, he gets upstairs.

Strips out of his coat, shoes, and scarf; and tosses them to the floor. Turns on the radio; switching instantly to a Western station. Gets out a dark bottle with a handwritten label out of the cabinet, pours himself a glass.

Some of it spills, staining the cuff of his white dress shirt a dark red. He rolls it up.

It's half seven. At this point, he'd be sitting in the dreary old living room of Maria's parents, overcome with a searing urge to get up and leave; or possibly throw himself out of the window.

Now he's mostly—

The radio shutters and dies, signal weaning. Eddie doesn't fix it, instead listening to the low buzz of the static. A circling question returns, *What's next?*

And he realises, he's *angry*.

Violently so; it burns through him like a direct and contained fever. Through the veins, like the sweet cherry alcohol. He'd thought, all those months ago, *I've been cheated out of it*.

And now here he is, again, feeling so—

"This is not how this ends," Eddie says aloud, voice foreign and unfamiliar around him. For a moment he stands still, alone in the encroaching silence.

He downs the vodka.

---

It's dark outside; almost pitch black. He's turned the lights inside down, too, save for one small lamp that glows dully with a dim murky orange. But he's looking out, into the night.

A sigh, then a rustle of paper. Then,

"Well, at this point," he says, *"I just need an ending."*

Eddie blinks.

Absently, almost mechanically, he says, "Leave it open."

"You know damn well I can't," Richie huffs. He's muttery and absent-minded, with an edge to every other sentence that seems unexpectedly, if not intendedly, cutting. A dangerous cocktail to stir if you want peace, *"This is contracted, if I don't follow the—"*

Eddie traces the knuckles of his right hand past the cold glass of the window. His own skin seems illogically warm. Radiating heat. *Peace and quiet*. He clenches the hand into a fist, then stretches the fingers out. The skin is rough, dry, reddened from work. There's no ring.

With a sharp movement, he pulls the balcony door open. He can hear the church bells again, a clear low tone, rhythmic like a pulse. It resonates through the hush of the night, and spills inside, carried with the frigid air.

"It's Christmas," Eddie says, in a low voice. He feels frightfully, wondrously awake.

"What?" Richie asks, sounding disoriented.

"It's midnight here," Eddie whispers. "Christmas."

There's a pause.

"Oh." Then, at length muffled, *"Guess it is."*

And he adds, a little more softness, *"Merry Christmas, Eds."*

Eddie doesn't say it back.

Instead, he closes his eyes, letting the cold sting the skin of his face. "You got any plans? For tomorrow?"

"Yeah, no, I don't—know," Richie says, and trails off. He sounds oddly put-out, or thrown off.

Like he hasn't been paying much *attention* to the reality he's in, and was forcefully shoved back into it. A sting of guilt pierces Eddie and instantly dissolves as something else, cold and strong like resolve, tightens in his chest.

Richie picks up, spurred on most likely by Eddie's unnerving silence. "*Bev and Ben are shooting in Canada, you know. And Bill's got the flu. Stan doesn't do Christmas, and I'd maybe invite him over for dinner but I think he's got plans. Mike will probably be going down to see his family, so.*"

"So, no plans," Eddie says, still quiet. Then, a half-question, "New Year's?"

Pause.

"I, uh. I guess? I got invited to ... " Richie inhales, as if interrupting himself, and clears his throat, "*But uh, to be honest, I kind of wanted to just stay in and write until I have something? I mean I'm really on a tight fucking schedule here, and this is—well.*"

"Well," Eddie repeats, mindlessly.

There's another pause, longer this time.

Then, "*You seem to have some ... some vision of my life,*" Richie says, impulsively, and sounding either caustic or simply defensive, "*that's—*"

Eddie blinks. His chest is filled with the sensation again, tighter than wistfulness, sharper and more solid. "That's what?" he says roughly.

"*I don't know,*" Richie says, as though in surrender.

And it's *sadness*, clear as a day now, lost and scattered over his words like all the small evasions he'd stacked up like a wall to keep Eddie at bay, all summer. "*Less lonely, I guess.*"

Sharply, Eddie inhales.

But Richie laughs, sharp, jarring. "*Oh that's fucking—rich. Don't listen to me. I haven't been sleeping well, I need to finish this damned thing, and ... you know. Go the fuck to sleep.*"

He trails off. Then he goes on, clumsily, "*I thought I'd—call you? If you have time? Tomorrow.*"

Hasty, then, "*You know, to ... bounce off ideas.*"

Pause.

"*And just, talk.*" Defeated. "*But I guess I don't know if you—well, it's up to you.*"

He sounds final and tense, as if revealing something. As if he were actually saying something, instead of talking around it, in relentless loops and repetitions. The anger returns, strengthened, warm, and burns in his sternum.

Eddie thinks, *I don't think you're happy.*

*I don't think you're happy either.*

"Okay," he says.

Richie laughs, a little nervously, clearly unsettled now. "*Okay?*"

Eddie stares ahead. The night is dark, moonless.

He asks, "Is that how you want it to be?"

There's another small silence, before Richie speaks.

*"Is that how I ... Jesus, what kind of question is that."* Then, *"I guess?"*

"You guess."

*"What are you ... Eddie, what the fuck are you getting at?"*

"I guess I'm asking you," Eddie says quietly. "If you feel *at peace* with your life. With the way it is. If it's the way—you want it to be."

There's a hollow silence.

*"I don't know,"* Richie then says, with something in his voice sounding almost scared, *"What about you."*

And then he says it.

"I want—" a breath, and again, more forceful, "I want you to *be* here."

The silence that comes, now, feels rapt and enormous. It swallows everything else.

He walks out properly, over the threshold, and into the cold. The night is stinging, and burns and bites at him, but he inhales even so, deeply. His eyes get slowly used to the dark.

And he repeats, louder now, into the inky low night over a snow-swept Warsaw.

"I want you to *come back* here," he says. "To me. That's what I want."

He can hear Richie breathe on the other side of the line, low and laboured.

"*You mean—*" he trails off, as if uncertain of the direction his own question would fall.

"Yes," Eddie says, feeling plucked open and exposed. There's a sound; something like a sharp intake of breath on the other side, but he feels too hazy to dissect it.

Down on the ground, a man is walking a dog, cutting a path through the new layers of untrodden snow. Dim yellow light spills from the tiny kiosk across the yard.

“I do,” Eddie goes on. “But we can—” he pauses, blinking in the cold air. *Snow*. Tentative yet, spaced out, it grazes the skin of his face.

“Figure that out when you’re here,” he says, softer. “If you want to.”

He smiles, half-bitterly, feeling ridiculous and giddy and *sad*. His eyes sting from cold or desperation, and he thinks he might be shaking.

Then,

“Yes,” Richie says, voice low and more tangible than anything physically close.

And he repeats it, “Yes.”

Eddie closes his eyes. The static hum of the radio inside cracks, shifting to a different station. The midnight mass has begun, a choir of voices, singing—

*Silent night, holy night.*

“When?” Richie asks.

“Now,” says Eddie.

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## JANUARY 1989

He wrenches the drawer open, too hard and fast, and it falls from his hands, to the ground, and shatters.

---

“Oho,” Patty says when she opens the door.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie says, killing any residual annoyance before it can properly surface. “I tried to call you but I couldn’t get through. I think your ... I think your phone’s disconnected.”

“I don’t like phones,” Patty says, as if it explains everything. “And I don’t want you to apologise to me, Eddie, I want you to get over yourself and cut the miserable bullshit.”

Her voice is low, whispery, and yet echoes strangely in the cold staircase as she leans in the doorframe.

“I’m trying,” Eddie says.

Patty motions her head inside. “C’mon in.”

It’s a post-war apartment, relatively new, with a high ceiling and walls raised directly on the red-brick ruins of old Warsaw.



Someone has messed up the insulation: there's a persistent draft, singing in the pipes like a haunting melody. Light dances through the dim windows, rows of colourful glass collected on the sill between ferns and succulents, then spills scattered over the uneven wooden floor.

Amongst the silence, an old cuckoo clock announces the wrong hour.

Patty's many plants include a very particular one, *Vriesea*, *flaming sword plant*, which she claims to neglect, but which nevertheless resists surrender to any sort of death drive with uncanny doggedness, pushed up to the dark corner of the hallway and persevering.

"Sonia," Patty had introduced it to him a few years prior, gesturing offhandedly.

Eddie had blinked.

"I can't believe," he'd said, slowly, "you named a plant after my *mother*."

"We're at war," Patty says, not specifying who she meant exactly.

He's sitting in the living room now, by the round table, realising suddenly the plant is gone from its usual place. *Dead?*

Patty's hand comes into view, setting a coffee cup in front of him. There's a daisy pattern on it. The rim is chipped.

"So what's eating you," she asks at last, sitting across from him.

Tall and bony in her slippers and a worn burgundy dressing gown, wild hair pinned up, the too-knowing eyes which have remained invariably sharp since childhood. She doesn't *pry* into things *per se*, but rather sees through the layers that surround things and stares into the core of them to the point of discomfort. Waits, then, till they open up and reveal themselves to her.

Like she knows Eddie will.

"I—" he breaks off. "I don't know."

"You don't *know*," Patty repeats.

Eddie puts both his hands on the table. Links them, hard enough his joints hurt.

"I called him," he grits out, slowly. "I—I asked him to come."

"Who?" Patty asks, frowning. "Frank?"

Eddie opens his mouth, then closes it. There's a strange pressure on his thorax that's tightening and tightening, even though he's calm. He's *calm*, stiff even, almost completely motionless, and yet he can't take in a proper breath. He can't—

"No," he says, "Richie."

Patty puts down the spoon on the saucer with a clatter, and Eddie fights the urge to flinch.

"Your Richie is coming?" she says. "You got in touch with him? Oh that's—oh, Eddie, that's *good*. Will you bring him round?"

It's kind. It's so ridiculously, simply kind, it brings him up short.

"I," Eddie says. "I don't even—"

And then something breaks.

And he starts crying, a sharp spasmodic thing, quiet but violent. Drawing haggard breaths, he presses his shaky hands to his face, forceful as if to physically stifle it, rein it in. But it's too unexpected, a tremor shaking his shoulders and ribcage, his whole body.

He almost scares himself, with how violent it is, how little control over himself he has, disintegrated into something like panic or grief, or possibly relief. It's humiliating and strange, to *feel* again, both terrible and good, and he desperately wants it over.

He pushes his elbow into the table, steadying, breathing through his nose and clenched jaw. Somewhere in the distance, the cuckoo clock is ticking, just slightly arrhythmic, just slightly off. He inhales once again, sharply, and opens his eyes.

Bony cold hands reach over the table and take both his wrists, tugging them down from his face. Hold on.

Patty is looking into his face. Her brows are furrowed.

Eddie blinks persistently, then tugs one wrist from her grip to run a hand over his face, wiping it. He looks out of the window, the ragged dull pattern of a view between the ferns.

"Sorry," he says, voice rough and unkind, not looking at her. "I'm sorry."

Patty's grip on his left wrist tightens a little before she lets go.

"Don't apologise to me," she says calmly, and he fights the urge to curse.

He still doesn't look at her, almost fully angry again. The defensive, biting kind. He feels like something belonging to a dusty corner and wrenched into the light, a cable plucked open and examined. Wire inside burnt through.

"What if—what if this is it," he grits out, in the same awful voice he wishes didn't belong to him, "What if this, *this* is what I am. And this is also the limit. Capacity. And it's not enough. Because it can't be. Fucking enough."

He rubs at his temple again, a sharp nervous gesture, pulled into motion by a sear of pain in his head. Patty watches him, he thinks, but he won't look at her.

"I feel insane," he says. "I'm too fucking old for this."

Patty sighs and shifts in her seat, fishing for something in the pocket of her dressing gown.

"Alright," she says. "Listen."

Eddie looks up.

There's a cigarette stuck between her teeth as she gets out the lighter, lights it, and then stirs her tea, so strong it looks nearly as dark and opaque as coffee through the glass. The silver of the spoon rings against the thin glass, full to the brim. Eddie fights the instinct to flinch, *It'll shatter*.

Instead, he closes his eyes, and rests his forehead in his hands. His head hurts from tension.

At length, Patty speaks.

"Remember our last year, before graduation. Sixty-eight, very coldwinter."

He doesn't raise his head, doesn't open his eyes. Feels the draft from the window creep down his neck, and he allows it.

Patty goes on, "We were walking home. It was a Friday, I think. You were still—seventeen? Younger than me, by a couple months. I did something stupid with my hair, and I asked you if it looked alright, and you said I could cut it all off for all you care. Remember?" He winces, without looking up. "I remember you cut all your hair off," he says. "What's the—"

"And *then*," Patty interrupts him, "you said you'd finally be a pilot this year. Remember that?"

Eddie tenses. Suddenly the cold catches up with him, arresting. Crawling up the insides of his lungs. Every next breath hurts, pushing at the ribcage as to stretch it thin.

"That you've sent off your papers to Dęblin. In secret, so Sonia wouldn't try to burn them, or stop you somehow."

He opens his eyes. There's a scuff on her tablecloth.

He says, "I forgot I did that."

"And I asked you if she knows," Patty continues, in her gently ruthless voice. "And you laughed. And you had that—way of laughing, back then. Whole-body, like a young horse. Energy barely contained. Like it was *dying* you get out of you. Contagious."

He doesn't say anything.

"And then you said," Patty picks up, after a moment. "*What does it matter? In November I'll be eighteen, and she won't ever say a thing to me if I can help it*. You said, *first one home wins*. And then you ran."

He's staring at the tablecloth. His chest feels tightly hollow. A contradiction: empty but sealed shut. *Funny*.

"And I ran after you," Patty goes on, something in her voice that's very rare, tightened with emotion, lower now. "But nothing could ever keep up. Not unless—"

"Not unless I stopped," Eddie says.

And then he repeats it, "I stopped."

His voice feels odd in the silence. As if caught on tape years in the past, and played, somehow unchanged, in a very different reality.

Patty doesn't answer. Eddie finally looks up.

She's so much *older* now. Early grey threaded in wisps through her dark hair, a shadow sewn under her eyes and into the sunken cheeks. She's greyed by weariness, thinned down, sharpened. But he does remember, and the way she's looking at him now, he sees something acutely *young* in her eyes that's almost scared.

And he's not sure, if it's her expression or a reflection of his own raised face.

"Sometimes," Patty says, very quietly, shaking her head. "I get so angry, I can't even say it out loud. But it's there, inside me. It's not *leaving*."

He looks up at her, eyes searching her familiar face. It's almost impossible to read her, at times. But he knows.

"Don't let it overwhelm you," Patty says.

Eddie looks down.

At length, the shadow passes: she shifts, taking a sip of her tea. Her glasses fog up. There's something stabilising, in her unruffled demeanour reverting itself to the default. "Look at us now," she mutters, the glass clattering back to the saucer. "We got old."

Smiling wearily, bitterly, Eddie looks down.

"You know, I used to be afraid you'll never snap out," Patty says suddenly, cutting back through the fading cottony silence. "When you proposed to Maria, I thought that was it. Coffin to the ground, Sonia, all of it just—*done*. Now I think—"

She trails off.

"—it's too late?" Eddie finishes, feeling exhausted.

"There's no such thing as too late until you're dead," Patty says, harsh enough to make him look up. "You're not dead, are you?"

A challenge in her eyes, almost.

He says, "No."

Patty licks her lips, eyes narrowing. "I think a lot of things are going to catch up with you," she says, "that have the capacity to hurt you quite deeply."

*Waking up in the snow.*

"Thing is though, Eddie."

She puts her elbow on the table, props her face on her hand, and looks at him, big eyes through the glass with something like fondness in them, "Now you're running, don't stop. Not again."

Eddie blinks.

---

The pulsing noise of take-off, a shaking, blue wan light spilling over him in sickly anaesthesia. He's got an urge to close his eyes and reach over to take his hand—but there's nothing, only a tangible absence near him.

There's a vacated state of childhood around him, a lost feeling of misplacement. *You wanted to be a pilot?* someone asks, *Fly, then.* His breathing is stifled, at short-intervals, belonging to the child in him, scared out of his mind. His ribcage expands across the body of the plane, inhaling. *I am so empty,* Eddie thinks, *I think I'll swallow the entirety of air.*

Then,

*You breathe alright now,* Richie says into his ear, from his left, and he doesn't dare open his eyes. He'll crash, he'll *crash* but he won't turn and see the lack.

---

He wakes two seconds before his alarm clock.

On the third of January, Richie's plane lands.

---

*"This is an announcement for passengers on flight 232 to London, Luton. The flight has been delayed due to bad weather conditions. The flight crew has arrived at the gate, but the ground crew is still de-icing the wings of the aircraft. Our new departure time is 8:50 PM."*

He's walking through a crowd of anonymity, pushing past grey faceless people in grey shapeless clothes, aiming for something familiar. His heart is beating very fast, but his hands are cold. Something wrong with circulation, probably. Faulty. Idly panicked, he thinks, *where is all this going, the blood?*

And then.

*It's—here.*

*Pulling me to you.*

Because there he is. Seeming taller somehow, and broader, in a puffy winter jacket and a mismatched scarf, wrapped haphazardly around him, jaw set tight in something like a spooked not-yet-smile, eyes wide behind his glasses. His hands are in his pockets. He's looking at Eddie.

And Eddie goes.

There's a moment of hesitance when he comes close—face to face, brows furrowed tight as in worry, heart still so stupidly skittish like a startled animal, but head held high, unspoken challenge. Something like a held-in breath, as Eddie stands in front of him, and *waits*.

Then it breaks; Richie grins and pulls him into a hug.

Yes, Eddie thinks, childishly, *There*.

It's a little shocking.

Human contact, something so warm and spontaneous, and *oh, you smell the same*, his face pressed into Richie's chest. Hands come up somewhat blindly, clutching at the artificial fabric pulling him closer. And he hears Richie laugh, a breathy noiseless thing, and feels himself smile in response, wider than he has in months. Richie rocks them slightly from side to side, like children or long-lost friends.

"Hey," Richie then says, and then he laughs out loud, the sound igniting nerve endings through Eddie's chest to the tips of his fingers like electricity, "I'm back."

Eddie inhales.

"Yeah," he says, a smile muffled into the hug. "*Hi*."

---

The shock fades, the first original burst of delight, as easy as it was involuntary. And—

Something shifts.

"Still the same car!" Richie crowed, delighted, as they barrelled through the blizzard in the parking lot, and tossed his bags into the trunk.

"Yeah," Eddie's said, with a half-exasperated smile, "I didn't magically turn rich over the span of a few months."

Months. Since.

*You were here last.*

*Months since I touched you.*

The car tilts on the bend, wheels skidding precariously on the thin layers of naked ice as he drives, a little recklessly but with a confidence of a honed-in skill and a familiarity of streets.

The windows are blurry with frost, all around except the front window, where he looks acutely ahead through the mirage of snow and lamplight, so that he doesn't stray. He keeps his hands locked tight on the steering wheel, because they shake too much, because he has to move *fast*, fast enough not to linger, so it doesn't show.

It's not easy—he can feel *distraction* crawl and pull at him from every side.

He thought it would be somehow less quantifiable, less instantly, disarmingly obvious, but the air is thick with something like damning inevitability. He can feel Richie's eyes on him, tentative but direct, and he can feel himself turn to him with every stifled instinct. He still takes up the same space, knees to the dashboard, shoulders almost touching his. It might as well be summer sunk in leaves and rapeseed; it's just as maddening now, in the wintry blue around them smudged with fractals of frost.

Absently, Richie draws something on the fogged-up window with his finger.

Strange feeling, to want to touch *so much* you have to keep your hands occupied, *thoughts* occupied, for fear of your own body betraying you and reaching before you know if you won't get burned.

Before you're safe not to crash.

---

"It's not much," Eddie says flatly, his entire undivided attention cinched to the act of turning the keys in all three of his locks, one by one, "It's even less than—you know. The summer house. How d'you call it last time, a *shithole*, well ... no way around it, it's—"

"I said I *like* it," Richie cuts in, something like a soft contradiction in his voice, half-distracted. *What are you thinking about?* He's keeping very close, hovering right over Eddie. It's distracting. "I said it's seductively ugly."

Eddie laughs, a little hysterical, and unlocks the middle lock with a sharp tug.

"Right," he says, meaning to only glance at Richie in passing. "I'm beginning to think that was—"

But the focused attention in Richie's eyes pins him in place.

"—a metaphor," he finishes, clumsily.

Richie smiles again, so wide his face almost splits. He's so fucking *close* it's unbelievable. *What if I just kissed you on this fucking porch*, Eddie thinks, *in this fucking hallway*, *what if I—*

"I made soup," he says instead. And wrenches the door open.

---

Richie yawns, "Man, I'm *dog-tired*."

Eddie stirs the soup. He's nauseous from nerves. "Did you not sleep during the flight?"

He'd showered, saying something about feeling grimy after a ten hours flight, and then strayed back into the kitchen so quietly he startled Eddie into nearly dropping his ladle. Had to hunch a little to fit under the doorframe, a little too tall for it.

“Ciao, little chef,” he’d said from the door, in a terrible Italian accent.. “*Leave the gun. Take the cannoli!*”

“This is not cannoli,” Eddie had responded, earnestly, which in hindsight strikes him as incredibly stupid. “Shut up.”

Richie had leaned over his shoulder, “Smells good,” he’d said in a low voice, the side of his face almost touching Eddie’s head. And Eddie forced himself to stay in place and resist doing something as stupid as dropping the ladle to the floor and bury himself in Richie’s chest instead.

He sits there, now, in the dim light of the one bad lamp; mostly still, but plucking at things around himself, spice containers, the tablecloth, humming something off-tune that sounds unnervingly familiar but difficult to place. He’d had to fold himself sideways, hips-first into the little nook, damp from the shower, hair unkempt and curling from humidity.

Looking awfully touchable.

“I did a little,” he says, voice drowsy, “Didn’t want to just fall asleep on you as soon as I got there, y’know.”

Eddie tries valiantly to focus; and parse the words properly.

The soup sizzles.

---

“Dude, this is so fucking good.”

He’s sitting on the sofa across from the little tea table, a diagonal axis away from where Eddie sits hunched on the edge of his armchair like a cat assessing its new surroundings. He feels like he’s on new terrain in his own space, wary of misstepping.

There’s a faint sheen of the television upon them, a dimmer light still, from the table lamp.

Eddie nods. He makes a choppy gesture.

“It has to be see-through,” he says, “Clear, you know. And it has to simmer for a while, with all the—you know, it’s about the proportions. Takes time.”

*What am I saying*, Eddie thinks, and stutters to a halt. Taken with embarrassment or anticipation, he can’t trust himself to see clearly, judge anything with a modicum of objectivity.

“Yes,” he finishes abruptly, awkwardly, and puts down the salt shaker he’d apparently picked up at some point to accentuate something. “Time.”

Richie is watching him with a strange expression. Something half-smiling, half-something-else, eyes wide and bright behind his glasses. “And *patience*, huh,” he mutters.



*He looks exactly the same*, Eddie thinks. But he also doesn't: paler, hair a little different, the light, the context around him. Different. It feels both new and long-missed at the same time, to have him so close.

He feels something so overpowering he has to get up, and does, unexpectedly. Richie's eyes trail up along with him.

"Okay," Eddie says.

"Okay?" Richie echoes.

"You can. Relax now. Please feel—at home. Here," Eddie tells him, feeling more and more ridiculous with each sentence. He's hot under the collar, strangled, but terrified of betraying it. "Tell me if you need anything. And, uh. We should maybe decide what to—what you want to do tomorrow."

"Okay," Richie repeats, more stymied now. He blinks, and closes his mouth. *Drowsy*, or—or something else. *Tired?*

*Let down?*

"And I don't—" Eddie blurts out, illogically, without breath.

Richie blinks again. "Hm?"

And Eddie blurts out, "I don't know where you want to sleep."

*Oh, great*, he thinks darkly.

*We can figure it out once you get here*, he'd told Richie. Well, he's—tackled it now, in the *least* dignified way possible, rammed into the issue with his Fiat while trying to approach it. *Fucking great*.

Richie sits unmoving for a moment, watching him. His head is tilted back, eyes half-lidded, unfocused somehow. His mouth falls open.

He clears his throat. "Well," he says, sounding somehow impossibly distracted, "I don't—"

Eddie bites down at the inside of his cheek. "Because," he says, "I need to get out the sheets."

"Sure," Richie says.

For a moment they're caught like that, him hovering over the couch, and Richie looking—hazy.

Then something happens, someone leans or reaches, but it's difficult to tell who or when. Richie is looking at him, and then he isn't, then he's got his hands fisted in the cotton of Eddie's shirt or and Eddie is pulled down or forward, to kneel on the couch over him, and Eddie is kissing him.

Richie's mouth opens once again, instantly.

"Yeah," Eddie breathes out, not thinking.

And in that moment he feels—so *very* human.

---

At breakfast, Richie is only half-alive. He seems to have left the other half somewhere in sleep, or possibly on the plane. He's blinking and shaggy and unkempt, and keeps rubbing at his reddened eye under the glasses. There's a reddened mark, too, on his neck.

Eddie nudges honey and jam and bread his way, on the table, pours coffee and milk, all the while not saying much at all. He feels a little like saying anything might untether him too much; so much he'll—fly away, maybe. It's like a little game: look, then look away, then look again. Try not to smile too stupid, *fail*.

The phone rings, cutting the wordless conversation in half.

Richie's eyes follow Eddie there and back to the phone. They keep looking as he listens to the familiar voice and feels something like the strangest mixture of relief and disappointment.

"Yeah," Eddie says into the receiver, voice muffled by his bun with jam, "What time? Yeah, I'll be there. No, s'okay. Said I would. Yeah. Mhm. Bye."

His jaw twitches as he puts the phone down. Odd blend of feelings, disorienting. Relief, because he already feels like he can barely *contain* himself, so maybe he needs a while to remember how to function properly. Disappointment, because the thought of leaving makes him—

Richie blinks at him slowly.

"Where you goin'?" he asks.

"Work," Eddie says, with a twinge. "That was Patty."

Another blink. "Patty?"

"My friend Patty," Eddie says. "I told you about her."

"Mm," Richie says, nose buried in his coffee. He's pushed up his glasses to the forehead, for some reason, and now pulls them back down. Blinks hazily.

"I won't be long," Eddie tells him. "You should just ... sleep it off." He thinks of Richie dozing off, and thinks of maybe coming home to him, and he stops himself from thinking. "You look like you need it."

"I'm awake," Richie says. "No."

"No, you're not awake?" Eddie offers, smiling despite himself.

Richie sets down his coffee, either eyeing Eddie speculatively or just squinting at him. Then he says, "Or I could come with."

"Or you could come with," Eddie repeats, without planning it. Richie's eyes catch his immediately.

"See some Warsaw maybe," Richie says. "Or just annoy you."

"Annoy me," Eddie repeats, and pauses. "There won't really be anyone in today. I signed up ages ago, because I thought I'd need something—"

He pauses. "To keep busy with."

Richie drinks his coffee.

---

It's strange; to do this. Walk through the door and go down the corridor, with Richie going with him. Richie, eating his last buttery buns walking down the stairs and filing into Eddie's car, and Richie squinting through the window at the spikes and edges of Warsaw as they glide along the roundabout.

Difficult not to imagine, with sudden awful clarity, something like this but routine and constant.

He parks a ways from work, under the Palace of Culture and Science, to the left of the cinema under the unlit spindly letters *Atlantic* neon. Sheltered by other empty cars, and kisses him, once, still inside.

---

It's dark in the projector room, dim and perpetually gauzy from cigarette smoke trapped inside. Walls soundproof, rows of sound unused equipment; objects and mechanisms threaded together with coils of wire creeping along them. *Like some dormant creature*, he used to think, then wince at his own tendency at seeking presence where there wasn't any. False evidence of something other than solitude.

He sets his second coffee on the counter next to the feebly flickering lights. Meticulous, mechanical, he flicks on switches and pulls at levers, glancing occasionally through the window into the empty auditorium. Takes another sip. Lights a cigarette. Turns on the projector.

*Click, shuttering.*

An eruption of blue light from behind, enveloping him like any object hindering light to get through, until he sinks into the chair, unseen.

Behind him, a door cracks open. Eddie turns around in his seat.

"Hi," Richie whispers, as though not wanting to interrupt something. He's mostly a shape, dim silhouette outlined with the wan light—till he gets close, a dusting of melting snow on his shoulders and in his hair. He's carrying a small cardboard box.

"Hi," Eddie says, pulling at the chair next to him so Richie can join him. Up close, he smells of the air outside, slightly damp. The skin of his cheeks and nose is reddened. Eddie inhales, and says, "You didn't get lost."

"*Oh ye of little faith*," Richie mutters, sniffing. He taps the cardboard box with his index finger. "The queue for this? Was fucking insane. How do you live like this."

Without waiting for a response, he presses the package into Eddie's hands. It's surprisingly warm.

“You tell me,” Eddie muses. “What *is* this?”

Richie shrugs off his jacket and drapes it over the back of his chair. He’s wearing a checked yellow flannel underneath.

“Open it. I made friends with the women at the dollar shop,” he says proudly. “Told me what to get and *where* to get it.”

“What, Pewex? What sort of sightseeing did you do, I thought you’d go to, like, Łazienki, look at peacocks or ... I don’t fucking know,” Eddie muses, plucking at the cardboard. He frowns. “And of course you did, everyone here *loves* Americans. What *is* this—*oh*.”

“But I think it’s worth it?” Richie says innocuously, ignoring Eddie’s string of thought and leaning a little closer, nose brushing past his shoulder.

“Oh,” Eddie repeats, almost childishly, “*Pączki*.”

Almost inaudibly, Richie mutters, “Something sweet.”

“I haven’t had one since I was a child,” Eddie mutters, picking one and squeezing the dough lightly. He bites into it; warm and awfully sweet, a sticky residue of powdered sugar and rose preserve. He licks some of it from the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you,” he says indistinctly as Richie leans over him and pulls the box into his own lap.

He leans away, sinking into the old sagged chair—for the better, maybe.

Because Eddie—

Eddie feels disarmed. Dissonantly, inadequately perhaps for the little gesture. But it feels like someone’s found a long forgotten string inside him and pulled at it, pulling it alive. He feels taken care of; startled and caught in it. Doesn’t quite know what to do with it.

Eyes travelling back to the auditorium, he takes another bite.

“What are you up to?” Richie asks.

“Sound test,” Eddie says, half-aware any and all attention he’d had to begin with for it has been lost irretrievably now. He blinks, trying to collect his thoughts from the jam-sticky, achy haze. “Hey, that ... screenplay of yours.”

There’s a beat.

“Yeah?” Richie says at length, muffled. “Which one.”

“The one from the summer,” Eddie says. “Did you write it—”

He trails off.

“I wrote it,” Richie mutters, not quite harshly, but rushed enough Eddie’s head tilts towards him, “with something in mind.”

“Something.”

“Something,” Richie says, and bites into his *pączek*.

Eddie thinks about doing something along the lines of: *lean in. Kiss him in the streaks of the projected light, on his jam-sticky mouth.*

Instead he says nothing. Reaches for the box.

They watch the unassorted footage; bluish light spilling over Richie’s every time Eddie glances over.

---

The empty corridor echoes as they walk, a distance apart, Richie with his hands in pockets. He walks with his eyes on the walls, tracing the rows of drawn posters.

“Would be funny,” he says. “To shoot something together.”

He overtakes Eddie, walking backwards, and links his fingers together as if framing a shot. Eddie pauses.

He’s struck with a startling sense of *déjà vu*. Here, in the dim, outlined with the dull light outside, he makes the same gesture as months earlier, sunlight streaming out between his fingers.

Just as then, he frames Eddie’s face.

This time, Eddie doesn’t laugh.

“Come on,” he says, feeling inexplicably, deeply unnerved; and leads them down the empty corridor.

Echoes follow.

---

A tram clatters past as they walk from the Film Institute, past a half-painted-over red *SOLIDARNOŚĆ* graffiti, remnant of the last of Autumn strikes. Richie hikes his head up again, curious, as Eddie walks fast, leading them.

The light is fading, thickening as they move, first lights in the shop windows blinking awake.

“Damn, it’s cold here,” Richie says, breaking the silence, and zips his jacket up to the chin. “Feels like another country.”

*Another country*, Eddie thinks, still too unsettled, and knowing it shows, this unease or misplacement. A sudden inability to reconcile two realities, a sudden inability to overcome it and be—

*Enough*, Eddie thinks. The thought stops his breath for a moment. He swallows.

“I want a hat like that,” Richie says again, still fighting the coagulating silence.

“What, *uszanka*?” Eddie manages, hoarse.

“Yeah, the fuzzy one, I want—”

Eddie takes his own and tosses it at him. It strikes Richie on the chest.

“Yours now,” Eddie says, throwing him a look. This, this is *easier* somehow, especially with Richie catching it, and instantly putting on. But then silence creeps back between them, and Eddie looks away, feeling ridiculous.

“Hope I didn’t lose the keys,” he mutters as they cross the street and between the rows of cars in the parking lot, lamps flickering to life above them.

Richie whips around to look at him. “What would happen, then?”

Eddie smiles darkly, “Crime.”

Richie laughs, but even that—even *that* doesn’t help. He feels the cold edges of panic grasp at his ribs and pluck them apart, cling to the thorax, and pull. *Don’t fuck this up now*, Eddie thinks, heart lodged in the throat. *Don’t fuck this one thing up, don’t you dare.*

He rounds the car, swallowing again, trying to disentangle the key with cold-numb shaky hands, and—  
Something hard and cold and shocking hits him on the head.

“What the fuck,” Eddie breathes out, dropping the keys. He looks around, startled, the left half of his face stinging. It takes a moment to see Richie, with some devilish expression painted across his face, positioned across the red car, hand still in the air. Eddie’s got hardly any time to even *look* offended, mouth open in shock, before another snowball hits him square in the face.

He stumbles backward.

“Oh, you bastard,” he chokes out, groping around himself to gather snow, and then he flings himself around the car.

“You little—” he grits out, as Richie tries to duck behind it and shove more snow, but Eddie is *faster*, throwing ball after ball of snow at him, and Richie laughs and *laughs*, “bastard, you—”

“Right in the face!” Richie crows. “I got you—”

“Fuck you!” Eddie shouts, straightening to hone his aim like a hero’s spear. “We’ll see who’s laughing l \_\_\_”

“I knew I’d finally run into you,” a voice, tragically familiar, rings out.

It’s a different kind of frost.

He drops his raised hand, breathless, with snow in his hair and scarf and a stinging mark on his cheek. Powdered sugar still somewhere in the corner of his mouth.

He turns.

“Maria,” Eddie says.

The day's tilting to an end now, light fading into hues of violet, enveloping them with something less exposing than full sunlight. But it's difficult even so, to stand and face her without flinching when he's caught this unawares.

She's dressed in her Sunday coat, grey poplin with a mink pillbox hat, fair hair shorter, styled differently now. Her eyes are a very pale blue, difficult to look directly at.

Quietly, too quietly to catch for anyone else, she says, "Eddie."

Then, "You're different."

*The same*, he thinks.

"I'm," he says breathlessly, the absurdity of the situation filling his lungs to dizziness. He almost wants to laugh, "I'm starting over."

"I can see that." She looks past him, at the place where Richie would be standing. And she says, with the same immobile face. "Better be careful."

Something in Eddie's chest pulls, hard.

"I am," he says tightly.

Nothing can be read from Maria's expression, it's so carefully moderated. She'd always known how to hide, so thoroughly that anything she wanted kept below the surface *was* unreachable.

He was the same with her.

"What about you?" Eddie asks, when she doesn't answer. And then, half-spiteful, half-genuine, "You deserve—"

"Oh, don't you *dare*," she interrupts, coldly. She's got tears in her eyes, Eddie realises, but her voice is so frightfully cold it seems to deny them; and it's hard to tell if they come out of sadness or humiliation; or both.

"Well," he says, feeling low and high at the same time; crumbled to dust and victorious. "Take care, then."

She doesn't answer, just turns, after a lingering tense second, and walks away, heels clattering on the pavement between embankments of snow.

For a moment, he stands staring at her.

"That was," comes Richie's voice, strangely stymied. "She—"

Eddie turns, and sees his face.

It's got that particular expression, like there's something conflicted inside him, too. And that thing again; hands in pockets, a shadow of something like guilt or fear, like he's trying to—

"She doesn't matter," Eddie says, voice steady despite himself, the anger in him becoming redirected, reshaping into resolve. "Get in the car."

Richie blinks.

“Yes, sir,” he mutters, almost smiling.

---

He keeps thinking about it the whole drive through the sleepy, dimming city, with Richie so *quiet* again, drawing something on the fogged-up window with one idle finger, head tilted to the glass.

---

And he keeps thinking about it up the stairs of the dingy stairwell, Richie trailing after him. He stops in front of the door, empty, no letters on it.

Then, a burst of something else. Reactionary, perhaps spiteful. Defensive, but not of himself. *Better be careful.*

*Fuck careful*, Eddie thinks, thinking about Richie firing snow at his silence, then falling silent himself. And he thinks he can’t stand to let it happen. To fail him.

He pauses with the key in his hand, then shoves it back into his pocket.

“There’s,” he says, voice slow and echoing, “no curfew anymore.”

Richie blinks, surprised. He says, “There used to be a curfew?”

“Yeah,” Eddie says. He hollows out his cheek. “Want to do something stupid?”

Richie watches him with wide eyes, face upturned; standing two steps lower.

Then, almost imperceptibly, he nods.

---

They walk back, down the narrow strait of the echoing staircase to the elevator; wait, buzzed-up and caught in a new strange and giddy tension, ’til it clatters up, doors sliding open.

Eddie walks backwards, smiling, until his back hits the corner, where the grimy mirror meets the wall behind him. The door clatters shut; light flickers. In some liminal interval of time, Richie crosses the distance between them and pushes Eddie up into the mirror. Kisses him just as the elevator jerks into movement.

The shift unbalances him; so it lands off-centre, corner of the mouth. He smiles, and Richie frowns a little, but noses under his jaw instead, under the scarf, mouthing at the warm skin on Eddie’s neck. Eddie tilts his head, granting access—and stills.



“What?” Richie mutters.

And Eddie can’t really explain it. He just shakes his head, sneaking a hand around Richie as if to ground himself against him. There’s another little kiss, lower now.

“Nothing,” Eddie whispers.

But he’s looking into the dirty mirror, at his own face. His cheeks are flushed from warmth, and his hair disarrayed, something wild and erratic in his eyes, hawklike. He’s taken with a bone-deep sense of *déjà vu*. An image of himself, not-a-year ago, shadowy and gaunt wrenching himself out of the reach of Maria’s following voice.

And there he is, now, looking so strangely alive. The face of someone else; someone more properly wired. Human.

*No*, Eddie thinks, *my face*.

He turns, maybe to kiss Richie on the mouth, maybe take Richie’s face in both hands and do something as nonsensical as thank him.

Instead, the elevator draws to a halt, jostling them both.

---

It’s dark outside: deep a bluish dark dispersed by the rosy sheen of lamplight refracted in sheets of undisturbed snow, covering the concrete like a blanket. The night seems halted, drowsy midst the cold, pulled tight and swathing around them. It’s not snowing. Everything is improbably silent.

The few lampposts and the blinking rectangular eyes of the windows mark the way as Eddie leads them inwards through labyrinthine corners of concrete, ankle-deep through the snow, blemished only by the occasional indentations of a stray cat on its night path.

They emerge into a small cornered yard, surrounded by old crooked trees, winter-greyed and asleep. Between them, a broken swingset, imprecise edges of a sandbox under the snow, and—

“The hell is that,” Richie asks curiously.

“*Trzepak*,” Eddie tells him, levering himself over the flaky-painted fence.

“Tshh ...” Richie says, then snickers to himself.

“You, like, beat rugs on it,” Eddie continues, walking on. “To dust them off.”

“Don’t know how to break it to you, Eddie, baby,” follow Richie’s hushed, amused words, “but you forgot the rug.”

*Baby*, echoes in Eddie’s head, Richie’s voice prickly and resonant as it thrums through the nerve system like physical warmth. He turns, facing him in the pool of dim light. They stand, bound by looking, on

the opposite poles of a crescent of footprints. At length, Eddie reaches, and wraps his hand against the cold metal. It burns in touch.

"I didn't forget shit," he says, and then levers himself up, one deft strong motion, balancing, till he's settled on top of it. Kicking his legs in the air, he looks down at Richie's upturned face—he'd drawn closer. "Used to—come here all the time as a kid. Hours and hours just ... hanging out. Time wasn't real, back then."

"I'm not sure it's real now," Richie says, and laughs.

He reaches forward, holding on to Eddie's both calves as if to steady him. To be contrary, Eddie kicks lightly at his sides, then lets go of the rail and runs his cold hands over Richie's head, tugging his hat off.

"Alright," Richie says, and raises his both hands in front of himself as if in surrender, "*alright*, have it your way. No knight in shining armour."

He's pretending not to smile, and failing at it. Eddie knows his expression is the same.

"Okay," he says, then tilts backwards, falling.

"Oh my—*fuck*," he hears Richie's voice and feels him try to catch at his ankles desperately as if to prevent him from crashing to the ground as Eddie hangs upside down, laughing, so much his chest hurts.

Blood rushes down to his head, dizzying. His eyes are wet. He doesn't stop grinning.

"Jesus Christ," Richie says with a startled laugh, "You fucking—"

"Oh, calm down," Eddie mutters. He grips the railing again, and flips backwards, landing in the snow with some latent efficiency earned twenty years ago. Bows, half-inelegant, and then straightens to look at Richie across the railing. Leans on it as if they were on two sides of a window.

"Pussy," he says, grinning.

Something in Richie's face changes. "Yeah?" he says, circling the *trzepak* with one hand braced around it so he faces Eddie.

"Yeah," Eddie says, tilting his face up, jutting his chin out in challenge. He knows his face is warm, flushed. Open.

"Okay," Richie says; then charges and tackles him into the snow.

The collision knocks the breath out of him: impact and startling cold and the weight of Richie on top of him.

"Oh my *god*," he chokes out, gasping for breath, "So that's—that's how you want to—play, huh?"

"Yeah," Richie tries to say, but Eddie cuts him off, jerking to the side, pulling Richie with him. He's stronger than he looks, always has been, and he turns them over deft and sharp, so that he's pushing Richie roughly into the snow, kneeling over him, panting in victory.

Richie coughs, or laughs, or possibly both.

“Fuck,” he wheezes. “My *back*. Are you trying to kill me?”

*Yeah*, Eddie thinks, *so you’ll never leave*. But he doesn’t say it.

Richie’s voice is rough and breathy, but his eyes are very bright, the same smile that seems too wide for his face. There’s snow in his dark hair, and Eddie drags it out of his face, fingers red and raw from cold but determined.

*I’m thirty-seven*, Eddie thinks, feeling seventeen at best, running home and meaning to take off and fly, a *pilot*, blood hot and rushed in his veins. *I’m—*

Richie’s hands catch up, travel up, settle on Eddie’s waist.

“Where were you,” he chokes out, somehow reading his mind, “my whole fucking life.”

Eddie exhales, breath into mist, and then blinks up at the dim windows behind dark gnarly branches.

“Well, here,” he says. “More or less.”

“Fuck,” Richie repeats, head falling to the snow. Chest heaving under Eddie’s hands, he looks up at the dark sky. And then he says, “I missed you so much.”

Eddie breathes out.

He could say, now, any of the things he’d wanted to say so much—any of the small big things crowding his thoughts, asking to pull at Richie and hold him in place, keep him somehow, prevent from being lost again.

Instead, heart heavy in his chest, Eddie braces himself, arms boxed on both sides of Richie’s face. Hovers over him, their noses almost touching. Richie’s eyes are half-lidded, mouth parted. His breath is warm.

“Someone will see,” Richie whispers.

*I don’t care*, Eddie thinks. *I don’t have time to*.

“No one will,” he says, some godless prayer, and kisses the next question right out of Richie’s mouth.

---

Back inside the elevator, his face stings from cold, prickly and numb even as he can’t stop smiling. His limbs feel heavy, body sluggish and slow, head clouded with a sudden and overwhelming exhaustion, pressing down at him from every side.

Opposite to him, Richie leans against the mirror, fruitlessly pulling at the zipper of his puffy jacket to tug it down, hair wet and sweaty over his forehead.

“Someone’s definitely getting ill now,” Richie announces.

“Yeah, *you*,” Eddie mutters, head falling back limply against the mirror. His words feel too slow, lagging behind. Or maybe there’s something wrong with his mouth.

Richie grins at him, “I don’t know,” he says. “You’re looking kinda hazy, Edward K., world champion of ski jumping.”

“M’not hazy,” Eddie says. The sound of his words feels stilted too. Wrong melody, or language, “And fuck you.”

“Cute,” Richie says with the same shit-eating grin. Then he says, “Fuck you too.”

Eddie yawns before he can argue. Richie laughs—and then, in some weird trick of the unreal time, they’re upstairs.

---

The engraving on the door says *E. + M. Kasprzak*.

There’s a thin cross on the wall, Christ hanging over the room like he’s given up the fight as well, Virgin Mary and John Paul raising hands in desperate prayers along the yellow tapestry on the walls. But there’s no one in it; and nothing. It’s stripped clean of any, any identity except the barebone and skeletal: grey light through the window and the cross on the wall.

“So you came back,” she says, quietly. “I knew you would.”

She’s facing away from him, voice familiar but changed, liminal. “What took you so long?”

She turns, and right past him; translucent in the air.

*“By some miracle, I got us meat for Sunday,”* Maria says her voice tinny and strange, as if rendered wrong. Recorded, badly, replayed to a wrong tonality. She goes on, chant-like like a litany, *“Why are you so dirty again? I can’t bear it when you come back like this. You know it. All you do is humiliate me. You’re just like your father. Your mother warned me, you know—walking around at strange hours, God knows with what people. She warned me. But you won’t be out in that garage, tomorrow, will you? We’ll have a proper dinner with—”*

“I’m not here,” Eddie says, forcing his voice, deep out of the thorax. It almost hurts. “I was never really here.”

She blinks, large pale eyes white and unseeing on the wall behind his chest. “Neither was he.”

There’s a pause, sounding like static, like a glitch.

“There’s something about you,” Maria says, with a white tear-streaked face, unmoving, “that isn’t right.”

---

He gasps for breath.

There's something *wrong* with him—acutely, physically. A pressure on the head, and eyes, a sort of terrifying inertia pressing down on the body and lungs. He's shivering, burning hot and cold, to the point of necrosis. *Did I leave the window open?*

The air seems frozen still.

"No, the door," he whispers, "the door to the garden."

*I feel asleep*, he thinks, stiff and disoriented, suspended somewhere outside current feeling. *There's no heating in the—summerhouse.*

He opens his eyes, and is surprised to find his cheeks wet.

It's dark. No light through the window except a wan sheen of lilac, shy and liminal. Early, before morning. For a moment, he stays unmoving, cold and achy with a fevered head, staring at the blurry angles in shadow through half-opened eyes.

Then he turns his head.

Richie sleeps next to him, face half-buried in the pillow.

Eddie keeps breathing, achy and shivering, trying to make sense of it.

---

He staggers to the kitchen, wrestling something onto himself, or *around* himself—big and confusing, it probably belongs to Richie. Something, shirt or hoodie, it smells of him in a way that should be comforting.

His hands shake as he tries to flick on the gas and set the kettle on. He needs coffee to be *awake* but can't stomach the thought of it, so he gropes for teabags instead. With impatient hands, he pours the boiling hot water directly into the glass.

It shatters.

He flinches away, but some of it reaches him, scalding the skin of his hands. There's a terrible noise, somewhere as it is happening, which startles him belatedly. He shuts his eyes, and grips the sink, trying to steady himself.

Then there's another noise, and the kitchen door swings open.

Eddie flinches again, on instinct.

But the tension fades away when he sees it's Richie—shuffling into the kitchen, bedraggled and hazy in the lowlight, in a way that brings back summer in the *strangest* way, blurry mornings at the end of August where they'd grown used to each other.

When they'd *known* each other.

There's something humiliating in it, this thought—or simply too huge to confront this early and this discomposed; in the dark and when his thoughts are blurry round the edges, spilling together into something more like emotions.

"I'm fine," he says, too roughly, grasping at strands of control. A shard of glass he'd swept into the sink cuts into the line of his index finger, drawing blood. He presses it to his mouth, frowning, thinking hazily of an antiseptic.

"Oh, *man*," Richie's voice comes, bleary and hoarse, "You don't look so good."

"Oh—well," Eddie says, strung taut. He feels detached from himself, held back to witness his body's delayed action, and somehow unspeakably disgusted.

With this, this awful *body*, with the reality of himself he's been faced with. "Sorry."

"Grim." It's Richie again, voice carrying with a dissonant fondness.

"Yes, *well*," Eddie grits out, still not looking up, trying to gather the shards with the rag, with one hand, without cutting himself again. "Then why don't you—"

He's thrown off balance by Richie's hands, suddenly very close, taking his own by the wrists and tugging them out of the sink.

Then he pulls Eddie closer, pressing the back of his hand to Eddie's forehead.

It feels *real*.

"You're warm," Richie mutters.

Eddie presses his eyes shut. He wants to protest and do something—*against* this. Defend himself. But his body betrays him: instead of flinching or fighting, it gives in and surrenders, forehead falling forward till it settles heavily on Richie's shoulder.

It surprises Richie, he thinks, deducing it from a small twitch before he reacts; touches the back of Eddie's head and draws him in.

It surprises *Eddie*.

"I'm not—" he tries, quietly, and breaks off. "I don't feel warm."

It's so dark, still, in the kitchen.

And quiet.

---

Day rises slowly, seeping grey lymphatic light through the window, thin and cutting. He sees it around himself, while feeling outside of it. The kitchen seems surreal, composed of cutting wrong shapes, stifled and hazy like an ill-remembered dream.

Dim-headed, he watches Richie lob spoonful after spoonful of honey into a mug of tea as he talks.

“That’s,” Eddie says, with effort, “that’s way too much honey.”

Richie looks skeptically at the concoction, licks some honey off his thumb. He stirs it some more, spilling onto the table, then the mug it into Eddie’s cold hands.

“Nah,” Richie says. “Antibiotics, eh?”

He stands pushed into the corner by the window, a blanket wrapped haphazardly around him.

“Huh,” Eddie says, clouded with a headache, feeling the fight leave him with another wave of fatigue. He shivers. Tries to get a hold of his thoughts again.

“I’m fine,” he repeats, with more pressure now, “Just need a ... moment. Then we can go.”

“Go?” Richie echoes, turning from the sink where he’s tending to the carcass of the glass Eddie broke. “Go *where*?”

Eddie blinks, focusing. “I meant to show you—” he begins, then gives up. “Around. I’ve got a plan.”

“You *had* a plan,” Richie corrects him. “And now you’re sick.”

“No, I have to—

“You don’t, though,” Richie’s voice is infuriatingly calm.

Eddie glares at him, shivering, miserable. Something in Richie’s face shuts. He wipes his hands on a cloth and leans against the counter, looking out of the window.

“Warsaw looks pretty cemented from where I’m standing,” he says. “It won’t run away.”

Eddie closes his eyes, feeling exhausted. His shoulders sag.

“No,” he says quietly, tightly, “but I don’t have time.”

There’s a pause.

“I don’t,” Richie says slowly, “give a shit. About Warsaw.”

Eddie doesn’t look at him, instead holding on to his mug, trying to look normal.

Richie goes on, merciless, “Not why I’m here.”

He inhales deeply, then pushes himself off the counter. He takes the mug out of Eddie’s hands and sets it back on the table. Pulls him in, then, in earnest now, as though made bolder by Eddie’s uncharacteristic compliance.

“How about we do this day my way,” he says. “Huh?”

---

He's kneeling by the small television with a bundle of wires and a square metal box in his lap. Eddie watches him through the fumes of his second mug of sickeningly sweet tea, head swimming with honey and painkillers.

He opens his mouth, gathering strength.

"I can't believe," he manages at length, "you brought a VHS player with you." Another hazy pause. "Is that legal?"

"I wasn't sure you had one?" Richie says, voice muffled as his head is buried behind the TV stand. "Better safe than sorry."

"And you're just going to haul it all back with all those... tapes, too."

"What? No, they're staying here. I want you to watch them."

"What the *fuck*," Eddie breathes out.

"That's why I brought them, 'cause I wanted to show you—hey, which did you say it was? The cable?"

Eddie closes his eyes for a moment. "SCART. Which by the way—"

"Which colour," Richie presses.

"Black. The flat one," Eddie says, feeling increasingly hazy. "Which *by the way* I shouldn't even have, no one has that here, how did you ... how did you even know I had a television. Would you bring a television. *Did* you?"

"No, you told me you watch that absurdist whatever and I—"

Something on the screen flashes to blue. "Oh, great," Richie says, emerging from behind the stand, "here we go."

He sits on his heels and looks back at Eddie. Eddie shivers again.

"Let's start with something light," Richie says.

---

He talks over the film. Half out of enthusiasm, Eddie thinks, half to explain it to him at times where the synapses fail to connect and process properly; and occasionally straying into looping digressions about other things he likes or he thinks *Eddie* would like. Eddie's eyes fall closed. It's nice.

At first, he'd tried to keep up, and picked at things, such as that,

"This is much too complicated," as he told Richie, jerking his head towards the screen where *The Terminator* was playing. "Did you write this? It's awful."



“No,” Richie said, sounding like he was trying not to laugh, and Eddie couldn’t gauge quite *why*.

He’s sunk lower on the sofa somewhere along the way, and—faded.

“Houston to Eddie,” comes Richie’s voice, quiet.

Eddie opens his eyes. His head has tilted backwards, warm and hazy, thoughts liquid and spilling into one another thickly like waves. He’s lying almost flat, covered with two blankets. Richie’s got his feet—socked in giant white American socks—in his lap. The movie’s quieter now, buzzing dimly in the background. Something has changed with the light.

“You okay there, buddy?”

Eddie snorts. “What d’you call me?”

“Comrade?” Richie says. “*Lover?*”

With effort, and a wince, Eddie tilt his face up to him.

“Annoying,” he says.

*You love it*, Richie doesn’t. But he doesn’t have to.

Eddie’s head falls back onto the pillow. “I’m angry,” he says.

“Yeah?” Richie mutters. “Why?”

He thinks, *because it was ridiculous from the start, wasn’t it*. Eddie trying to *prove* something, to Richie or to himself. That he can make himself into enough, to be at worst and unwavering good memory. Something to remember.

“Because I—” he frowns, scattered. “What the hell are you *laughing* at.”

“How hard are you gonna kick me,” Richie says, rubbing at one of his ankles, the same spot where he’d tried to catch him and keep from falling in the snow, “if I tell you you’re cute.”

Eddie blinks slowly, frowning.

“No,” he says, “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, neither do you,” Richie says. “Look at that, isn’t that your thing? Absurdism?”

“Fuck that,” Eddie says empathically, closing his eyes wearily, and frowning. He’s so *tired*.

Richie lets go of his feet, then, which feels somehow ridiculously like abandonment. But then he crawls closer, and hovers over him, planting a kiss on his cheek. Eddie scrunches up his face.

“You’ll get sick,” he says angrily, helplessly. He wants another one, but won’t say it. Doesn’t have enough strength to reach for him anyway.

“Eh,” Richie says, kissing him again like Eddie did ask for it. “So what.”

---

He wakes up again, *later*.

Wind is howling, pushing the naked branches into movement. Time passes: light dulls and hazes into blue and violet.

Richie spreads the pictures on the table. Blurry and overexposed: bottles, a house, a hammock, a shaky human figure down a field. Shaky human *face*, laughing.

It's a ridiculous thought—

"They're not very good," he says. "But thought I'd bring them. An, uh, memory."

"Oh," Eddie says.

It's a ridiculous thought—some strange throat-tightening relief. That it happened, all the feverish summer. Pressed onto paper with tricks of caught light.

"I didn't—have anything," he says, at length. His head is swimming. "Just your shirt."

There's a silence.

Then, quietly, "You kept that shirt?"

"Yeah," Eddie says, trying not to feel humiliated. Mostly feeling lost. He doesn't remember Richie's answer. Perhaps there wasn't any. Perhaps he never said it.

He thinks, *sorry*. He can't look at Richie anyway, so he closes his eyes.

---

And *much later*.

It's dark already, entirely so, outside. Richie's got a light on, the shoddy table lamp, warm, and he's turned on the radio. It spills over hazily, *The Police* or something else sentimental, the music coiling around Eddie like soft fabric or smoke.

Richie is sitting on the floor, propped against Eddie's sofa, and writing over the pages strewn around him.

Eddie blinks at him: touch-distance.

He tries to remember the *sunlight-burn-feeling* from the pictures, but the dim awareness of wind outside remains. He wants to speak, and ask Richie, *don't write this down. Come here and hold me. Now*. He can't find the strength.

*This will end soon*. When he closes his eyes, Richie is still there and shows him the screenplay, coming alive in his eyes, into pictures and colours on a screen, two men with linked arms, a blur of red in between, running. *Not much time*.

*I'm happy now, Eddie thinks. I'm not.*

He drifts in and out of sleep, unsure if he imagines Richie fixing his blanket with another irresponsible kiss.

Maybe.

---

He has a dream, in which he walks out into the field.

He's thin and threadbare; dispersible like smoke: narrow shoulders in a shirt that's too large on him, bare skin bitten by the wind.

Ahead over the fields, dawn rises obscurely. The land is burning.

Fire cracks along the tall wisps of wheat, bowing over the field and rising, billowing, into the air, rising like fumes of incense in a pagan prayer, imprinted deep within the soil. *Dziady*, communing with spirits stuck in liminality.

He stands, face illuminated with the fire, warm with it. He feels strangely present. Tangibly alive, corporeal, almost burning as well as if the haze grows inside him.

For a moment he stands still, watching the fire.

There's a wild force to his stare, he knows, something that brings to life. His eyes alone make the field come alive. And out of the field, out of the fire, wrapped in particles of it like fireflies, someone is walking towards him.

Eddie shuts his eyes, suddenly piercingly scared.

Silence falls. There is no one. Field deep asleep, dead.

Something grazes his cheek—snow has started to fall.

---

The cold eases.

---

At the end of Thursday, they go out to *Mozaika* for drinks.

Yellow and red neon hues spilling over the rows of people in booths and by the circular counter; hazy vague people threaded with thick cigarette smoke; the overlapping murmur of their voices muted by the loud vibrating music; the large room made intimate in the crowd.

It's aimless between them, now, has for a few days: caught in a space somewhere beyond words.

*Stilled, maybe*, Eddie thinks. *Delayed*.

He tries not to think of it too *much*, but focus on the present experience. *Here, now*, with Richie still here, right in front of him. He's sprawled in the booth, almost too big for it, and he seems lost in thought.

*Not yet*, Eddie thinks.

"Now she's gone," Richie speaks out, suddenly, and shatters the illusion without knowing. "You can, you know." He pauses. "Get out there."

A spike of cold pierces through Eddie's chest, pulling at the temporary stitches there.

"Get out where?" he says, frowning.

Richie shrugs one shoulder, picking at his drink. His eyes are glazed behind refracted hues of eerie light. There's a moment, full of inert, desaturated noise between them, the kind that settles and coagulates into a silence, if left unattended.

"You know," Richie then says, without looking at him. "Settle again? With someone. Your way this time."

"My way," Eddie echoes, very quietly. He feels suddenly absurdly cold.

"You're free now," Richie says, looking away.

At first it *hurts*. It shouldn't. It isn't even *meant* to. But god, it *hurts*.

Then it somehow changes, tightens and hardens, and becomes something like anger.

*You wouldn't*, Eddie thinks. *You wouldn't be like this, you wouldn't have come here, if it were nothing to you. I know you.*

He looks desperately into Richie's face, turned away, as if to solve him.

*Don't I?*

"I won't," he says at last, roughly.

That gets Richie's attention. His head turns towards Eddie. "What?"

It's his turn to shrug, looking out into the bar. He thinks, with a surprisingly cold logic, how to put it in words.

He could go on running. Chasing after echoes, splinters and fragments. *I could keep looking for you, Eddie thinks, in everyone I meet and step back with every move of advancing. Always coming back. To that goddamned summerhouse.*

He'd woken up; and he'd exhausted his capacity of wanting things. He could go on running, indefinitely. But it would be futile, even if he did. Doomed from the beginning. With the original existing and being enough, even if not quite *his*.

Want too much and you won't know what you wanted in the first place. And Eddie sees it, clearly. He still wants it.

He looks at Richie. *Do you not?*

"I think I'm good," he says aloud, voice still rough. The words sound so unbelievably final and rough, they're almost surreal.

And then he adds, to the dawning, terrified confusion on Richie's face, "This is enough."

Beat.

"No, it's not," Richie says, over the music, sharper than he usually is.

Eddie smiles, or winces; one corner of his mouth tugging up as he picks at his drink. "It is."

"Eddie—"

"You don't understand," Eddie says quietly, slowly, "How I lived before. This is ... a lot. It's enough."

When he looks up, Richie looks stricken. Horrified; or perhaps scared. Eddie considers the possibility of being too much and then declines the guilt. It's not like he's begging.

Instead he looks head on. He thinks there *is* something wrong with his face—something betraying. It shows the crux of the thing, the ugly intensity of it. He looks at Richie, pale and unsettled in the artificial light spread around him like a movie still, with the way of looking: hangman and convict.

*Who is who*, Eddie thinks.

"It is," he says, meaning more than he could put in words. Richie's eyes are hardly even blue here. "To me, it is."

There's a moment of lull, the finality sinking in slowly like a fabric taking in a stain.

"Fuck that," Richie whispers, looking crushed. "You deserve better than this—this fucking."

*Matchbox of a flat*, Eddie thinks, *broken radiator and so much grey light you can drown in it if you forget yourself*. Yeah. But what Richie is saying isn't *that*, it's something else. *You deserve better than me*. And Eddie knows he doesn't.

He doesn't even want to.

"Rich," he says, voice soft, treacherously so. "I'm really—"

“No, you’re not,” Richie says, shaking his head very slowly. His forehead is creasing, face drawing taut in something like fear. It picks at him in ways different than Eddie, quieting and blanching. But Eddie won’t let it, not now. “It’s not fair to—”

“Yes,” Eddie says, reaching across the table. “Listen to me.”

“No, fuck that—”

“*Listen* to me,” Eddie says. He can see Richie’s expression shutter, his body shudder and tense in denial.

“I’m better,” Eddie tells him, bluntly, “than I’ve ever been before.”

“That’s not enough,” Richie repeats stubbornly. “You should—”

“Why are you so dead set,” Eddie says, with a laugh that’s almost genuine, “on telling me how to live my life? I’m doing okay.”

“Eddie,” Richie says weakly.

“I’m *okay*,” Eddie says. “I promise you.”

Richie won’t look at him.

It goes on, around them, the world oblivious to the lack of attention. Chatter of people and smoke, and his eyes downturned. Dim coloured light.

It might all just as well not exist.

“They don’t know I’m here,” Richie says, quietly.

Eddie frowns, attention sharpened even more by the sudden change of topic. “What? Who?”

“My ...” Richie trails off. “Anyone.”

Pause.

“They think I’m shooting something. Somewhere.”

Eddie can’t move, unsure *what* is coming but knowing it’s not *aimless*; not as much scared as simply aware of the inevitable impact of it. *Something is being said here*, he thinks, and waits.

“Why?” he asks, at length. Richie still doesn’t look at him.

“I don’t ...” Richie trails off, picks at his drink. “I get, uh, a little—” he trails off.

Then picks up, again, “I think they worried I might—”

Someone passes by, and Richie cuts off, but Eddie leans over the table, acute now, and presses, “What?”

“Do something like this,” Richie says, almost too indistinct to be coherent. He rubs at his eye under the glasses. Clears his throat. “Bev was watching me. But then you didn’t call, and it seemed ... *done*, so they ...” he hesitates again. “Let it go.”

Eddie feels sharply awake.

“You mean ...” he feels choked, throat tight and burning, but fights himself to remain composed. “You mean, *me*? They thought you’d do something—you mean, they were afraid you’d come to see me?”

“I don’t *mean* anything.”

“*Richie.*”

“Not *you*,” Richie says, and it sounds strained. “Me, they think. They ...” he trails off. “They think I’ll do something stupid and they’ll have to pick me up from the floor. Again. And I think they have this ... idea one day there won’t be much left to pick up.”

Eddie watches him: all tense and tries to understand. He can’t make sense of it.

He stops himself, looks down at his own hands in the strange lighting.

*Why would you be afraid?* he thinks. *What do you think is happening here. What do you think I’m doing to you. With you.*

And then it makes sense. Something; maybe Richie’s look to the side, avoiding Eddie’s face with such desperation as no one neutral could muster, maybe a sudden shift of the light from red and yellow into a haze of blue and purple, maybe he knew it all along.

*Nothing*, Eddie thinks. *He’s afraid there is going to be—nothing. After this.*

Richie isn’t looking at him, instead at his hands splayed on the counter on two sides of his drink. Leather jacket, hair curly from humidity and the snow outside, lashes low on his cheeks.

Eddie thinks, *Let me in. Let me.*

“Hey, can we change the topic,” Richie says quietly, voice taut.

There’s a pause. Richie seems not to know to say. He keeps his head down. At last he goes on talking, voice uneven and ragged, clearly regretting speaking at all, “I heard that—”

“No,” Eddie hears his own voice. Richie looks up, then, eyes eerily blue now, in his strange face, in this strange light.

He seems thrown by the look of Eddie’s face.

“No?” he says, half-terrified.

“Yes,” Eddie says, then gets up from the booth, and walks closer to Richie. “C’mon,” he says. “I wanna take you somewhere.”

---

The tall grey tenement looms, indistinct, on the sharpest point of the cross-section, the stymied low light of old lamp-posts scattered by the drowsy aimless snow. Two figures in winter clothes walk down

the street, heads bent and shoulders hunched, sole vectors of movement in the otherwise uninterrupted landscape.

There's a dormancy in the air, hazy with the frost that's come swathing the city along with nightfall.

Eddie thinks, *how?*

How to go—from something still tethering two strangers, to each other. A thread through all this space.

Richie's steps creak in the snow behind him. Head thrown back, hair tousled looking up at the old pre-war tenements with fading Soviet posters in gauzy warm light; cleaved by snowflakes.

Eddie turns his head and walks on, between the lampposts.

*To a certainty*, he goes on thinking. *That I want to take this thread and pull or follow. 'Til I get to you.*

He stops in the shallow layer of fresh snow covering a trodden path up worn down steps in front of a building.

*'Til it's not a thread, but simply a shared space.*

He stops in front of a building; squeezed between tenements. Shabby front with scraped neon letters, alight with wan purple light, flickering mildly at uneven intervals over the door.

Spelling out, *KINO*.

He doesn't turn, but waits for Richie to approach him and hover close by.

"What, you wanna go dancin'?" comes Richie's voice, half-soft, half-ironic. Uncertain.

A dim music comes up in tides through the cold air, blooming from somewhere close, a rhythmic synth-pulse of a familiar melody. Seedy little nightclub, just downstairs.

"No," Eddie says, earnestly. He feels cold and focused, intent to see it through, "C'mon."

He walks up the whitened steps and into the building.

Narrow hallway, dim and dark, dizzily warm after the frost outside. And on its two sides, like the wings of a strange shabby altar, two hand-drawn posters emerge from the lowlight,

*A SHORT FILM ABOUT LOVE / A SHORT FILM ABOUT KILLING*

Inhaling sharply, Eddie walks on, steps echoing on the hard floor, towards the yellow-lit ticket office at the end of it.

A hazy-eyed girl in a black turtleneck reading Nietzsche with a suspiciously dark glass of tea fixes them with an indifferent unseeing stare as they approach, Richie still quiet, trailing after Eddie like a shadow.

"Two tickers please," Eddie says. "For the Kieślowski."

Eyes to Richie, "The one about love."

"Thirty," she says, pushing the tickets under the glass.



He keeps his eyes on Richie, who seems uncharacteristically stymied. Shoulders hunched forward a little in that way of his that seems defensive: hands in pockets, eyes half-obscured with the light reflected in his lenses.

Something in the lines of his face, uncertain and familiar, pushes through Eddie's irrational nerves. A corner of his mouth quirks up. At length, as if delayed, Richie mirrors the smile.

"Thank you," Eddie says to the woman, who isn't looking at them. Under the counter he reaches for Richie and pulls, cold fingers on the warm skin of his wrist. Richie goes pliant.

There's no one inside, except an old man sleeping in the corner of the front row, as though stranded, leftover from a previous screening.

It's cold there. In the box of wainscoting and dusty-red velvet, breath mists up in the wan blue light from the screen, enough for Eddie to fix the jacket on his shoulders and pull it tighter.

He leads them to one of the last rows, right below the shuttering streaked light of the projector piercing the screening room; then pulls him in further into the scraped vandalised chairs.

*What I'd do*, Eddie thinks, *if you'd been here. Earlier.*

Richie laughs quietly, an exhalation rather than sound.

"What," Eddie says, in a low voice.

"Nothing," Richie whispers. "Is this a *date*."

Eddie mouths, "Shut up."

Richie laughs again, quieter. He folds himself into the chair next to Eddie's. Then he says, "You keep surprising me."

"Good," Eddie says.

The movie starts. The white-blue light scatters odd shadows over Richie's face as he watches. Eddie can hear Richie inhale next to him. He twitches lightly, shifting in his seat. Like he's cold, or restless.

Someone speaks.

Richie inhales sharply, "I can't understand shit."

"It's okay," Eddie says, feeling his chest tighten. He bites at his cheek, "I'll translate it for you."

Richie laughs again, private and hushed now. "*What?*"

Eddie looks at him, trying not to be so damnably earnest, but he can't. His jaw tightens even so, as if in direct response to Richie's hesitant giddiness.

"I'll translate," he says again, eyes drifting determined back up to the screen. Realigning his whole body, he shifts in his seat, closer to Richie. And he reaches, with exact precision, for Richie's left hand, cold now, to take it in both of his.

He doesn't have a ring anymore; there's nothing there to touch except skin.

“If you want to,” Eddie adds, quieter.

There’s a moment of pause. On the screen, a woman is picking up a parcel at the post office.

“Yeah,” Richie says, barely audible.

“Okay,” Eddie says, and runs his index finger down the knuckles of Richie’s left hand.

He whispers through the whole movie, trying to narrate without ever fully focusing, Richie’s head tilting closer until it falls to his shoulder and rests there, in trust or defeat.

Eddie kisses his hand.

---

The snow’s picked up in the span of two hours, thickening in the wind, crowding the air.

Richie is hauntingly quiet.

Eddie shuts his eyes. Then opens them.

*Fuck it, he thinks. I’ve come so far, might as well—*

“Did you like it,” he hears his own voice, before the thought can formulate itself properly.

“I’ve got the impression,” Richie says, voice muffled. “That it was a good movie.”

Eddie draws to a halt. “Impression?”

There’s a beat. Richie stops too, as in a very strange dance of pulling and pushing back, and turns to Eddie. His face is open and uncertain, like it had been months ago, in a starkly different time, in a starkly different light, in Eddie’s garage.

He says, “I was distracted.”

Eddie tries to breathe steadily. He manages, “I’m sorry.”

And, “I’ll get it on tape for you. Put it in a parcel. *Signed.*”

Richie laughs again, and it sounds fragile. His expression, in the warm hue of the frost-splintered light, looks caught somewhere between grief and wonder, like he wants something he can’t or won’t have.

*And why*, Eddie thinks, fighting the urge to step forward and reach for him. *Why.*

Then Richie inhales, deep, slow, and looks away. “I didn’t expect it.”

“Expect what?” Eddie says. “A movie?”

“That you’d call.” Silence, a far-off cry of an ambulance. “I didn’t think you would.”

Eddie blinks, face stinging in the cold.

“I just needed time,” he says hoarsely. “I had to end it. Close it. I was always going to try, I just needed —”

Richie isn’t looking at him. Eddie repeats, “I was always going to try.”

Richie nods, hands in pockets. Snowflakes tangle in his hair. Something inside Eddie shutters and clenches.

“I *have*,” he says. “I called you. Back in November.”

It might be light playing tricks; but he thinks Richie tenses.

“You thought I was someone else,” Eddie goes on, “talking about work, some sort of ... broken deal, being done with something, and I just—” he trailed off. “I don’t know. I suddenly couldn’t do it. Find out if you really forgot. I think I got scared.”

Then he says, “Stupid. Wasted time.”

When Richie looks up, his eyes are reddened, from cold or something else. Hard to say.

“That was you,” he says.

Eddie nods, “You know what I’m talking about?”

Richie blinks, then nods.

“For a moment I thought it was you. I thought,” he pauses. “But then you hung up and I thought it couldn’t have been.”

“Well, it was,” Eddie tells him. “Me.”

Richie’s face is tense and pained still, but it’s easier to read now. “I thought you got the screenplay.”

“I told you, it was at the post office,” Eddie says, almost in tears, out of—something. Frustration, grief for almost losing it all over something so crass and inane. “The fucking *post office*.”

He breaks off, and inhales sharply. “And what kind of communication is that, anyway. What if I *never* got it, would you just never say anything ever again, would you just let me—”

Richie shrugs. He smiles a brittle smile; cracked. “That’s how it goes.”

Eddie shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “No, it *won’t*.”

Richie twitches, looking at him through the snow.

Eddie says, “I don’t want it to go like that.”

He waits, but Richie doesn’t look down again.

“C’mon,” Eddie says. “Let’s go home.”

A dim music lingers, carrying from somewhere else, a room behind the walls, following them—like after-echoes of the cinema, afterimages pressed into his eyelids when the eyes fall shut. It sounds eerie, haunting in the silence.

It's dark and quiet in the apartment, shapes barely visible. But he knows Richie is standing in front of him, breathing quietly. He looks through the lowlight, eyes adjusting to complete darkness.

It's cold, heating cut off again. Summer long dead and over.

He doesn't want it anymore.

They lie in bed, Richie's face lies, tucked into his collarbone.

Eddie threads his fingers through his hair, and watches the ceiling.

He thinks, *a short film about—*

---

A little red car drives down the white road between snow-shrouded fields, a single point of colour cutting through the stretches of white.

It stops by the edge of a lake, hugged by two crescents of pine. The water has frozen over; reflected trees bending as if drowsy, to lay on the surface.

There's a hush to everything, a startling quiet that almost feels holy.

Morning still early, the light hasn't changed yet, tensed instead in a perpetual threshold: half-day, half-night. It tinges everything, including the two people getting out of the red car, in a wan violet haze.

There's an indistinct cry of the birds that forgot to fly away for winter.

---

The car trembles as Eddie slams the door.

There's a pattern, wobbly, drawn repeatedly on the passenger window until it's frozen over. Two letters, *R + E*.

Richie snuffles, fixing his puffy jacket tighter around himself. The cold is different out here, dry and biting and dizzying to breathe in, crisp and clear.

Eddie inhales deeply, smiling at him.

“Are we going skating?” Richie asks brightly. “Can we go on the ice?”

“Yeah,” Eddie says with a strange tight feeling in his chest, and jerks his head towards the lake. His hands are nervous and restless, and he keeps them pocketed just in case. “But be careful. You don’t want it to crack.”

*Let’s get back, Eddie thinks, to the starting point.*

Richie makes a face. “You’d fish me out.”

“What if I wouldn’t,” Eddie says, lips almost numb in the cold. But Richie just looks at him sideways and smiles in an odd way, half-cocksure, half-shy, and—

*Do you know?* Eddie thinks, counting every breath. *Did you realise, too.*

He steps on the ice, tall and lanky, arms outstretched like a scarecrow, and he slips. “Shit, fuck!”

Eddie flings himself after him on instinct, catches his wrist, the sleeve of his jacket, then Richie himself, chest to chest. Steadying. His hands seem to burn against the frost-stiff fabric as they map the contour of Richie’s forearms and elbows and then settle. Firmly.

“Careful,” Eddie says, all too earnest again, without looking in his eyes. Some of the terrifying feeling escapes him in a laugh.

Richie laughs, too, in that—in that way of his, palpable through the layers of clothing, and Eddie feels suddenly lighter. Too insubstantial to weigh down the ice, chest full of a near-alive warmth that he’s unequipped to handle.

It will unstitch him into something like a flock of tattered migratory birds, and scatter over the winter in flight.

“I’m okay,” Richie says, too softly.

Eddie lets go of Richie’s arms and draws away. He gets out into the lake—expansive and unscathed, stretching ahead. But he doesn’t pocket his hand again, leaving empty in the biting air.

*Is it stupid?* he thinks, heart beating with a terrible perseverance, worn and overworked after years of strain. Unused to this. *Unreasonable? To know this early, to know at all. Feels belated anyway. I should have known the moment I saw you.*

He says it to himself, then, a noiseless movement of lips, as if to test the shape and limits of it. He finds none. It feels, if anything—something awfully like conviction, under heartbeat, in the ribs. Waiting.

So,

“Kocham cię,” Eddie says aloud; not loud at all. *I love you.*

And he thinks:

*I won't ever say it again. Unless you ask me. And I will let you go, go back to your America. And I won't hold you back.*

He's not looking anywhere except ahead, where the white's become almost blinding.

Then Richie's suddenly there, taking Eddie's cold hand, and then leaning in, close enough Eddie can feel his breath, as he asks:

"Say that again?"

So Eddie does.

**Notes:**

the end.

(but not really.)

:')

**Series this work belongs to:**

- [← Previous Work](#) Part 2 of the [motion picture](#) series [Next Work →](#)